

# LOGOS=GOD

## *Observations on Logo Design and Sacred Cows at the Century's Close*

BY MARK FOX

*"In the beginning was the Logos,\* and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God."*

—THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Design god Paul Rand stated that "a logo is always a reflection of a company and not, as is commonly understood, the other way around. If a company is disreputable, it follows that the logo will be disreputable, however well the logo is designed." The typical view of the relationship between a company and its logo can be illustrated with the diagram below:



A logo represents the company, and transfers its inherent meanings to the company which is then perceived as hip, or dynamic or stable, etc. Rand's theory, in which a logo's meaning is acquired over time through the actions of the company it symbolizes, can be seen in the diagram below.



Rand saw the logo as a kind of corporate vessel that is filled with meaning by the company, regardless of the form the logo takes. I agree with Rand's description of the company/logo dynamic, but it seems incomplete to me and it curiously minimizes the role (and importance) of the designer. What if I encounter a logo before I know anything about the company, before the vessel has been filled? In this case, all I have to form my opinions—to gather meaning—is the name of the company and the way the identity is articulated by the designer. Because of this, I believe there exists a more complex relationship between a company and its logo, more symbiotic than merely dependent. This relationship can be illustrated in the following manner:



Rand's theory is somewhat monolithic, and fails to take into account the idea that a company can impart multiple

meanings to its logo, or that meaning can be made and understood in highly individualized ways. For example, the Mercedes-Benz three-pointed star identifies the automaker with a logo whose form suggests ideas of precision, perfection, equilibrium, things celestial and the Trinity. But whether that logo symbolizes something good or bad—whether it succeeds in creating in your mind the positive associations its form evokes—depends upon your interactions with the company's products, services and employees, and your familiarity with the company's history and reputation. There are those who think that Mercedes-Benz makes some of the finest automobiles on the planet; I know of one man who refuses to own one because the automaker provided staff cars to the Nazis. The latter meaning is not universal, to be sure, but it exists regardless of how beautiful the car or how smooth the ride.

In addition, Rand did not acknowledge the fact that meanings can become attached to logos separate from the actions (or the wishes) of the company. The Procter & Gamble "Man in the Moon" logo, in use since the 1860s, became the focus of misplaced zealotry in the 1980s when fundamentalist Christians claimed that the symbol promoted satanism. Rather than face a boycott of their products and further harassment, P&G dropped their use of the logo—although the charges were baseless.



Ironically, another controversial symbol from the same period, the Confederate battle flag, still flies over parts of the American South even though it is legitimately identified with slavery. Civil rights groups have been trying to limit (if not eliminate) its use by state governments for years, but they have made little progress. NuSouth, a black-owned business in Charleston, South Carolina, has taken an innovative approach to living with this charged symbol: it markets goods emblazoned with the Rebel flag in the colors of African independence—red, green and black.

\*John's use of the Greek word *Logos* is usually translated into English as *Word*. (It is related to logic, and can also be translated as *thought*, *reason*, or *wisdom*.) When the Apostle John writes in the opening of his Gospel that "the Word was God," he literally equates *Logos* with God.

Both of these examples illustrate how a symbol can undergo shifts of meaning unintended by its original creators. Rather than symbolizing a company in an immutable, static way, a logo is a vessel that holds meanings and associations created by varied sources: the designer, the company and, at times, even the public. Although these meanings can change over time—and probably should if a company is growing and evolving—ideally the form of the logo should remain fixed. The CBS eye has been in use since 1951 and remains a reductive gem; the General Electric monogram is virtually unchanged 100 years after its introduction. If meaning is in flux and form is not, it is incumbent upon the designer to create symbols that will function as vessels in a multitude of contexts over a significant period of time. What follows are some observations about these corporate vessels we call logos, with particular attention given to their form and meaning.



Designing an innovative identity for a \$20 billion international behemoth like Lucent Technologies is virtually impossible. Landor Associates succeeded in breaking the corporate mold by creating an abstract icon that is energetic and humanistic. This “innovation ring” draws on the wealth of historical meanings associated with circles and wheels: the eye (vision), the sun (light, life), perfection, wholeness (holiness), God and eternity (without end). More interesting to me, though, is that the calligraphic logo bears a resemblance to the mythic *ouroboros*, an image of a self-consuming serpent. (You can make out the lower jaw of the snake in the Lucent logo on the upper left of the inside ring.) Joseph Campbell describes the snake eating its own tail as “an image of life. Life sheds one generation after another, to be born again. The serpent represents immortal energy and consciousness.” Although the connection is probably happenstance, the *ouroboros* is a particularly appropriate symbol for a company born from the restructuring of AT&T.



Within the apparel industry, the corporate logo—once added to a product to signal authenticity and origin—has become the product itself. The former product (shoe, shirt, cap) now functions merely as the distribution vehicle for the true product, the logo. This mirrors the late 20th century shift in the American economy from the production of goods to the dissemination of information: from the real to

the virtual. Other profit seekers will no doubt follow the leads of Marlboro and Caterpillar, two non-apparel companies that now market their logos on merchandise other than cigarettes and earth-moving equipment.



One of the first considerations when designing a wordmark is the combination of letterforms in a company's name. Although the abbreviation IBM presents a particularly inauspicious combination of letters, Paul Rand opted to design a wordmark anyway. Rand himself described the grouping of letters this way: “Each character gets progressively wider, thereby creating a somewhat uncomfortable, open-ended sequence.” One wonders why this realization didn't stop him. While it is true that his striped wordmark is more memorable than the unadorned original, and that this device has been widely imitated since, it's not an elegant solution; I find Rand's letters ill-proportioned, and their relationship clunky. Further, the rectangular negative shape formed between the letters I and M is optically charged and distracts one from reading the grouping as a whole. The eye lingers there, fighting the feelings of “efficiency and speed” Rand sought to convey.



The Calvert Group, a “socially and environmentally responsible” investment fund, adopted this logo after six of their managers consulted the I Ching. “Six coin tosses resulted in six straight lines, which according to the I Ching, represents the most powerful symbol, known as ‘the creative.’” Ironically, the process of choosing this logo communicates more clearly than the logo itself. Would you invest in a mutual fund whose managers toss coins to make important decisions?

Unlike simple repetition, a common device in logo design as shown in the Marabu Sport logo, the J.A. Henckels and ABC logos employ what I call evolutionary repetition. These logos create a pattern (and expectation), and then vary that pattern to create surprise (and pleasure). The breaking of a pattern is what makes Emily Dickinson's slant rhymes so memorable: she gives us the rhyme, but

not in the form that we expect. For example:

Essential Oils – are wrung  
The Attar from the Rose  
Be not expressed by Suns – alone  
It is the gift of Screws –



The Chevrolet cross silhouette is more powerful and distinctive than the more conformist circular silhouettes of the BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen logos—cars that, for the most part, are better designed and more expensive than a Chevy. A logo's silhouette is only a small part of its memorability, but it is a part worth exploiting. Chevrolet periodically uses the cross in a savvy manner, but they also use it in atrocious ways that lessen its visual impact and dilute its power. To see one of their muddled branding efforts in the flesh, look at the application of the cross on the rear of the 1999 Malibu.



The Doubletree Hotel logo, designed by Landor Associates, is remarkably similar to the common glyph for lesbianism. Although lawyers typically conduct worldwide trademark searches before a corporation launches a new logo, “matches” occasionally fall through the cracks. In this case there probably aren't any legal repercussions from the likeness, as this symbol for same-sex union isn't owned by another entity with profits at stake. There could be other repercussions, however, if the hotel chain finds the similarity problematic.



## Next:

Paul Rand recalled his difficulty in creating an identity for Next: “The word ‘next’ is not depictable; that was the problem. What are you going to show? It's simply not describable in typographic terms.” The now-defunct ad agency Altman & Manley competed with Rand for the Next logo, and their answer was just that: typographic. Admittedly, the styling could be sexier, but it's a smart and witty design nonetheless. Unfortunately, this solution never saw the light of day. Rand was so revered at this stage in his career that his very involvement became part of the meaning of the logo. There are times when it becomes difficult for clients

to separate the designer from the design, and reputation from reality.



Alvin Lustig noted that, “The most successful marks are quite often those that make no effort to describe a product or process accurately but, rather in the selection of forms, attempt to evoke a certain quality that will, by repetition, slowly come to mean everything that the client originally desired.” If logos are indeed vessels, it would seem that those which are somewhat open-ended in their form—relying on typography or abstract shapes—are easier to fill with meaning. If the form of the logo is too literal, for instance, or too specific in its message or style, it may resist some of the meanings the company tries to attach to it. The evolution of the identity for the German pharmaceutical company Bayer provides a fine example. The imperial lion resting its paw upon the globe suggests world domination, a concept that wouldn't have suggested good health to the Allies of Europe and America during World Wars I and II. The “pill,” on the other hand, connotes cleanliness (through its form) and health (via the cross), and is simple enough to hold a variety of other meanings.



What if a reputable, successful company happens to use an inferior, badly executed logo? According to Rand, that logo will be equated with the success of the company, and be perceived as good however poorly the logo is designed. Unfortunately, this is the case with Music Television. Although the MTV identity is quite flexible and has been used in innovative ways (primarily through animation), the forms themselves and their relationship to each other are awkward: three elements in three disparate styles have been patched together to create a visual hodgepodge. (To clearly judge the intrinsic qualities of the three elements, isolate them from each other.) The fact that the identity has been brilliantly applied should be applauded, but a logo's usage—or the success of the company—should never be confused with its level of craft.



The first function of a logo is to identify the company. If it fails to identify, it doesn't really matter if the concept is inspired or the forms beautiful. To properly identify, a logo should be distinct; lack of distinction leads to a lack of memorability. When designers utilize faddish elements in their work, the glut of similar logos that ensues can create unintended meanings for the public, namely that these companies have no vision, and these designers have no imagination. As Paul Rand pointed out, "If a thing is not intrinsically necessary, one has to be a bit suspicious."



Although it was recently added to the NYSE and has a current market valuation in excess of \$107 billion, America Online will never be perceived as a market leader with this amateurish logo. (Will someone please do something with that cheesy script type?) But as an intelligent, well-designed identity for AOL won't eliminate browser crashes or improve content, a new logo should be addressed only in concert with fundamental operational changes. Until that time, America Online is destined to remain "the Sears of the Internet" no matter how big they get.



After the connection between a company and logo (or between an idea and its representation) is sufficiently understood by the public, the power of the logo can, on occasion, be increased by dropping the company name. Beyond making the symbol translingual, the lack of text can allow the logo to possess a certain ineffable quality that suggests far more than it could before. The ancient Hebrews realized this and, as a result, had a proscription against writing the name of God. That which is named is always less powerful than that which is unnamed.



When taken out of context, a symbol can shed its acquired meanings rather quickly. This is especially true of logos for companies or products that no longer exist and are no longer supported by advertising. In these instances, the corporate vessel I referred to earlier is nearly emptied, and all that is left is a residue of meaning that borders on the

archetypal. It is at this point, freed from the positive or negative associations generated by a company's stock price or by its latest marketing blitz, that one can begin to see a logo's intrinsic qualities clearly. Is it visually interesting? Is it well crafted? Does it have what Adrian Frutiger refers to as "radiance," or what the Hindus call *rasa* (sap or essence)?

Although Paul Rand would have us believe that a poorly designed logo has no deleterious effects on a successful company, I believe that this pairing creates a dissonance that unnecessarily muddies the company's message. Is the company stylish and well-crafted like its products, or is it confused and oafish like its logo? A company should speak with one voice.

A carefully considered logo will do the following:

**Identify (be distinct and therefore memorable)**

**Create desirable associations (whether via content, form, or both) while avoiding negative ones**

**Harmonize with the company's products, services and culture to avoid dissonance**

**Reflect the company in an elastic way that allows for shifts in the logo's meaning**

**Work easily and inexpensively in all media**

The beauty of a well-designed logo is that its form will resist change even as that form allows the logo's meaning to evolve. Without these qualities, a company will be tempted to change its logo whenever opinions, fashions or business conditions change; this is not only expensive, it is confusing to the public and potentially damaging to the reputation of the company. When we as designers unleash imitative or poorly-crafted logos with little understanding of their potential meaning on our clients, we do these clients a disservice and do damage to our profession. To design is to designate, to consciously specify form and meaning. To do otherwise is enjoyable, but it is not design. ■

*Editor's Note:*

*People always talk about the impact that visuals make on the human mind, but when you get right down to it, there is a real failure to take into account the depth and breath of meaning that symbols have on the human psyche. Mark Fox raises many of the issues that we as designers should consider as we go through the corporate identity development process with our clients.*

—DK HOLLAND