

## The Image of Corporate Symbol

by V.O. Ajala\*

### Abstract

The purpose of the study was to seek answers to the following questions:

1. Which of the 20 corporate identities randomly selected is rated as best vis-a-vis the four features of an effective logo?
2. In what order are the four features important to the publics whose goodwill the companies seek? The features are memorability, recognition (attractiveness), appropriateness and uniqueness.

Using the survey method, a questionnaire was designed to elicit response from the publics. A sample size of 85 was drawn up departmentally from academic staff of faculties of Arts and Education, University of Ibadan. A questionnaire return rate of 61 percent was achieved.

Results indicate that of the 20 logos, that of Seven-Up Bottling Company was rated the best. Three others that followed in the order of excellence are those of Nitel, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, and Mandilas. The order in which the four features of an effective graphic identity are important to the respondents of the study is memorability, uniqueness, appropriateness and attractiveness. The challenge posed to public relations practitioners is therefore summarized in this question: Does your corporate symbol speak louder than words?

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## Emblèmes des compagnies commerciales

### Résumé

L'objectif de l'étude était de trouver des solutions aux questions suivantes:

1. La quelle des 20 symboles choisies au hasard est classé la meilleure d'après les quatre traits d'un cliché efficace?
2. Dans quel ordre d'importance sont les quatre traits aux public que la compagnie cherche à impressionner? Les traits sont: la recollection, l'identification (attraction), la justesse, et le caractère unique. En utilisant la méthode d'étude, un questionnaire fut établi pour tirer des réponses du public. Un groupe échantillon de 85 personnes au niveau des départements parmi les membres du corps enseignant des facultés des Arts et de l'Education de l'Université d'Ibadan à été sélectionné. Le taux de reponse au questionnaire de 61% fut atteint. Les résultats montrent que parmi les 20 symboles, celle de la campagne Seven-Up était classée en tête. Les trois autres qui ont suivi par ordre d'importance sont celles de Nitel, Université Obafemi Awolô, l'Isle d'Ife et Mandilas. L'ordre d'importance des quatre traits d'une identité graphique efficace d'après ceux qui ont répondu à l'enquête sont: recollection, caractère unique, justesse et attraction. Par conséquent, le défi lancé aux praticiens des relations publiques se résumé en cette question: est-ce que votre marque est plus éloquente que les simples mots?



## Introduction

Countries all over the world are often spoken of as symbolised by their products, animals and birds. Peat, potatoes and parish priests are still valid symbols of Ireland (Firth, 1975). The beautiful bald eagle has come to represent the legal sovereignty of the U.S.A. When the eagle is commercially used it suggests everything from friendliness and freedom to respectability and patriotism. Center and Walsh (1981) declare that as a vehicle of communicating patriotism the eagle is rivaled only by the flag, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance. The eagle of the USA is a symbol of strength and bravery.

The Nigerian symbols include the Coat of Arms, the Flag, the Anthem, and the Pledge. The Nigerian Year Book (1986) reveals that the Nigerian eagle also stands for strength.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics emblem has been described as 'rich in symbolism that echoes the motto Harmony and Progress'. Ojo (1988) affirms that the emblem, designed by Mr. Yang Seung-Choon, an associate professor of Seoul National University, was derived from a traditional Korean motif. The emblem's three swirls represent the harmony of heaven, earth and man. The outward and upward motion is progress toward world peace throughout the realization of the Olympic ideal. The inward motion stands for the gathering of people from all over the world for the games.

Throughout the world, each national flag is an object of strong sentiment: its symbolism is deeply felt, serving as a symbol for the unity of a large body of people. Against this background of the representativeness of national symbols, corporate symbol draws its ascendancy. Public relations professionals have long been concerned with the image that a client's name projects in its publics. A company's visual communication materials are an expression of that company's philosophy and culture, its abilities and goals. The materials can announce or mumble, inform or confuse, delight or depress, stimulate or irritate and make or break a sale. It is therefore important for every company to plan its visual communications carefully.

## Communicating Through Symbols

Communication involves more than semantics; communication uses symbols and stereotypes. The symbol offers a dramatic and direct means of persuasive communication with large numbers of people over long lines of communication. Symbols have been used since the dawn of history to compress and convey complex messages to the multitudes.

Cutlip and Center (1982) assert that symbols play an important role in public relations and fund-raising programmes of health and welfare agencies. The Red Cross, the upright sword of the American Cancer Society, the U.S. Forest Service Smokey Bear symbol are referred to as examples of the best-known symbols.

Today's business pace dictates brevity in communicating. To this end, visuals can be a valuable adjunct to help bring a concept to life. Factor (1984) stresses that good graphics communicate a message quickly: 'they capture not only the eyes but the imagination as well'. Visuals might only incorporate a few lines or splashes of colour, but if knowledgeably and creatively designed, their communicative power is effective. Because they are so effective, these design supports have become an important element in communication.

## **The Essence of Corporate Identity**

Twenty-five or 30 years ago, American businesses began to discover that the way they presented themselves in their printed communications could have a far-reaching effect on the way they were perceived by the public. De Neve (1985) further reveals that when the age of corporate identity programmes arrived in America it was led by giants like IBM, Xerox, and every company worth its market share was finding a graphic designer who could help it define and develop its own individual graphic style. Companies started to design and create corporate messages that are attractive, innovative and memorable in an effort to reach their target audiences.

Successful graphic design can be said to serve several purposes. It captures attention, draws the reader into the total message, it conveys an essential 'something' about the company. The American experience indicates that corporate graphics have become an important tool for selling shares and marketing a company's products or services.

When Mel Wathen (1986) recently became interested in the strategic importance of corporate identity, he examined 12 American corporate identities and reported that 'any company whose corporate identity does not accurately communicate its line of business and its strategy is probably suffering from a subtle but adverse profit/earnings ratio which keeps its stock price depressed.'

A change in corporate identity often heralds a significant change in the long-term strategy of a company or in the nature of the company itself. Wathen reports that the day the newly-restructured International Harvester changed its corporate name to Navistar, the company's stock was the most active issue on the New York Stock Exchange. A public relations consultant and an observer said, 'the Navistar Corporate



identity programme has had an immediate impact on all the company's audiences. It gave employees a positive new identity of working for a winner, which is so important when selling a product'. Wathen reports that Wall Street, which had ignored Harvester, changed its reaction dramatically in one day. Lenders reacted favourably, distributors and dealers expressed a great deal of confidence in the new identity.

Other companies studied by Wathen changed their corporate identity for more than one of the reasons listed below.

1. Symbol projects the image of a progressive utility.
2. Symbol is more contemporary, more memorable, indicates growth.
3. Symbol focuses on 'what's real', what's distinctive about the product.
4. Symbol gives the company a fresh, dynamic look.
5. Symbol projects a company's current activities and strength.
6. Old symbol was found to be a 'weak link, poorly remembered and limiting.'
7. New symbol enjoys 'enormous awareness and goodwill'.
8. New symbol promotes higher multiple and a higher stock price.

While an existing company may change its symbol for any of these reasons, a new company may need to establish its presence and product. Wathen concludes that corporate identity is a major corporate asset, it must be carefully planned, developed, implemented and controlled to be effective.

In Nigeria, profit and nonprofit institutions are increasingly emphasizing their identities in an effort to create a sharper, more contemporary public image. The result of the challenge posed by this competitive trend is that many business firms are wasting advertising and public relations naira by using corporate symbols that do not truly or effectively represent their companies. For example, from December 1, 1988, Nigeria Airways started to wear a new logo. The new logo is composed of a flying eagle super-imposed on the letter 'N' and in Nigeria's green-white-green colour to replace the old one which has a flying elephant. *Nigerian Tribune* of November 1988, reports that this change would cost the airline 'nothing less than 2 million'. Quite a worthwhile investment from a public relations perspective. To show the importance of effective logo, the president, General I.B. Babangida, gave his blessings to the new Nigeria Airways logo. This is part of the efforts of the sole administrator, Major-General Olu Bajowa, to have Nigeria Airways become 'the national airline of pride that she deserves' (Iman 1988). Cutlip and Center (1982) advise that a corporate symbol should be selected on the basis of (1) memorability, (2) recognition (attractiveness) (3) appropriateness and (4) uniqueness. They further stress that 'a symbol should be distinct, different and in character for the institution using it.'

The graphic design of a corporate body could be typographic in style, for example, Tate & Lyle (Nigeria) Limited, or purely graphic in style, for instance, National Bank. It could also be a combination of both styles (Nigerian Telecommunication Limited) (See Appendix I).

De Neve (1985) emphasizes that graphic design is not to be thought of as just decoration or something to be considered only when copy runs short or needs to be enhanced or clarified. 'Design is an integral part of the communication effort, as inseparable from it as words or thought are from content and meaning.' Although the value of good design, says De Neve, is difficult to measure at the bottom line, she confirms that most organizations today would rather work with it than without it. In this light, a study of some 20 Nigerian corporate symbols collected from advertising messages in the print media was planned with a view to establishing the degree of importance the publics (selected for this purpose) place on corporate image (See Appendix I for the 20 corporate symbols). The sample for the study was the University of Ibadan academic staff who rated each company identity on the four features of an effective logo: (1) memorability (2) recognition (attractiveness) (3) appropriateness and (4) uniqueness. The dual purpose of the study was to discover (1) which of the 20 logo designs speak louder than words by meeting the set standards of effectiveness and (2) the order in which these features are important to the publics that the organizations serve. Perhaps we should examine each of these features vis-a-vis corporate identity.

### **Memorability**

For corporate identity to be memorable, impressions must be made to ensure or at least aid long retention of the intended image to be created in the mind of the audience, since learning is inseparable from memory. Memorability of a message, an advert, a symbol, has long been considered as appropriate index for its effectiveness. While discussing memorability, reference must be made to the fact that psychologists have identified three stages of memory. They confirm that to be stored for a long time, information must pass through all three: sensory, short-term and long-term. It has been emphasized that meaningfulness, familiarity, high imagery and pleasantness of information are aids to easier recall. Visual pictures or images are generally easier to remember than words. This, of course, is an added value to aid memorability of corporate identity.

### **Recognition (attractiveness)**

Sandage, Fryburger and Rotzoll (1983) agree that recognition is simply a matter of identifying something as having been seen before. Recognition



is usually superior to recall. From advertising research viewpoint, Gilson & Berkman (1982) describe recognition test as one designed to measure whether an advertisement has been seen or whether people are aware of a product or brand. Whatever its purpose, a corporate symbol must first get itself seen, read or heard. To be recognized a symbol must capture attention, draw the viewer into the total message that conveys an essential something about a company. In short, the symbol must be attractive.

### **Appropriateness**

A company's logo type ought to project that company's image. Roberts (1966) confirms that 'something (referring to design) that requires soft expression will be badly served by powerful, brutalistic typography, while a forceful message would be nonsensical if delivered in an elegant, delicate and unrestrained typographic whisper'. He argues further that it is quite possible for a designer or graphic artist to produce a satisfying aesthetic arrangement which is a complete contradiction of the message it sets out to convey. Appropriate selection of a typeface is therefore important. Roberts says typefaces fall into two broad groups: text and display. Outside the two main groupings there are four major families of type: Roman (or serif), sans serif, exotics and scripts. These should be appropriately selected and used to project the image of the company. A designer or typographer must seek to understand from the client the basic purpose behind any piece of work, the information to be conveyed, at whom it is aimed, and in fact, the history of the company vis-a-vis its achievements, its age, in order to produce a symbolic representation of the company in its logo type.

### **Uniqueness**

Companies rely on the graphics of their symbols to convey attributes beyond the power of the written word. DeNeve stresses that a corporate symbol may convey strength, stability, friendliness and reliability of a company. Selame (1984) crystallizes the need for a company to ensure that consumers do not mistake its products for a competitor's. Selame further warns against imitation; she encourages companies to 'embark on a new packaging programme based on the unique, distinguishing characteristics of their products.' It is pertinent to ensure that a company's design is so distinctive that the public would come to identify it with one product from a single source. Legal backing needs to be sought to ensure that imitator's design does not confuse consumers/public.

### **Study Procedure**

For the purpose of this study only 20 corporate logos were randomly selected from the *Daily Times* advertisements run on weekdays during the

month of July 1985. The logos represent different manufacturing and service-rendering sectors of the Nigerian economy. Below is a breakdown of the institutions whose logos were selected.

## **1. Manufacturing/Marketing Organizations**

### **(a) Food and Drug**

Seven-Up Bottling Company  
Tate & Lyle Nigeria Limited  
Johnson & Johnson  
Nigerian Tobacco Company  
Continental Pharmaceuticals Limited

### **(b) Breweries**

Golden Guinea  
Standard Breweries

## **2. Service-Rendering Organizations**

### **(a) Banks**

National Bank of Nigeria Limited  
United Bank for Africa Limited  
Savannah Bank  
Wema Bank

### **(b) Universities**

Lagos State University  
University of Ife (Now Obafemi Awolowo University)  
University of Lagos

### **(c) Others**

Eko Hotels  
Mandilas  
International Institute of Tropical Agriculture  
Nigerian Telecommunications Limited  
Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation  
Nigerian Institute of Management



## **Study Design**

The most suitable design for the study is the survey method. The questionnaire was used as a data collection tool.

## **Questionnaire Design**

The first part of the instrument sought for demographic information like sex, age, group, faculty and department and status of the respondent. The second part was a rating scale of 1-5 where 1 is Very Poor, 2 is Poor, 3 is Fair, 4 is Good and 5 is Excellent. Each corporate symbol was scored under each of the four features: memorability, recognition (attractiveness), appropriateness and uniqueness. A logo could score a maximum of 20 depending on the perception of the respondent. Each copy of the questionnaire was accompanied with a copy of the 20 logos appropriately labelled for ease of reference.

## **Population and Sample**

All academic staff of the Faculties of Arts and Education represent the population from which the respondents were selected. As at 1985-86 session (University of Ibadan calendar) there were 129 and 108 academic staff in Arts and Education, respectively. Fifty and 35 respondents were selected on departmental basis from Arts and Education faculties. Only 52 respondents returned the questionnaire, representing 61 percent response rate. From this number, forty (21 from Arts and 19 from Education) were finally selected after discarding some responses for reasons of incompleteness. The responses were sorted and data were analyzed.

## **Data Analysis**

The Table below provides the list of the company logos and the ratings per faculty.

**Table 1. Respondents' Rating of the Logos.**

| Logo  | Faculty of Arts Rating | Faculty of Education Rating | Total Score | Final Rank |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| National Bank                                   | 261                    | 223                         | 484         | (3)        |
| Savannah Bank                                   | 308                    | 237                         | 545         |            |
| United Bank for Africa                          | 308                    | 274                         | 555         |            |
| Wema Bank                                       | 206                    | 199                         | 405         |            |
| Lagos State University                          | 265                    | 213                         | 478         |            |
| Obafemi Awolowo University                      | 343                    | 294                         | 637         |            |
| University of Lagos                             | 279                    | 237                         | 516         |            |
| Golden Guinea Breweries                         | 295                    | 242                         | 537         | (4)        |
| Standard Breweries (Nigeria) Limited            | 284                    | 194                         | 478         |            |
| Eko Hotels Limited                              | 313                    | 240                         | 553         |            |
| Mandilas  | 319                    | 285                         | 604         |            |
| International Institute of Tropical Agriculture | 313                    | 274                         | 587         | (1)        |
| Seven-Up Bottling Company                       | 343                    | 307                         | 650         |            |
| Tate & Lyle (Nigeria) Ltd.                      | 267                    | 231                         | 498         |            |
| Johnson & Johnson                               | 294                    | 235                         | 529         | (2)        |
| Nigerian Tobacco Company                        | 273                    | 229                         | 502         |            |
| Nigerian Telecommunications Limited             | 348                    | 294                         | 642         |            |
| Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation         | 286                    | 281                         | 567         |            |
| Continental Pharmaceuticals Limited             | 259                    | 209                         | 468         |            |
| Nigerian Institute of Mgt.                      | 290                    | 238                         | 528         |            |

According to the respondents, four logos speak louder than words. The corporate identities stand out in the crowd. The four 'best' logos (each scored 600 and above) are: Seven-Up, Nigerian Telecommunications Limited, Obafemi Awolowo University and Mandilas.

**Table 2. Respondents' Perception of the Order of Importance of Features of effective logo.**

| Faculty   | Uniqueness | Attractiveness | Appropriateness | Memorability |
|-----------|------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Arts      | 1535       | 1403           | 1440            | 1496         |
| Education | 1242       | 1135           | 1237            | 1303         |
| Total     | 2777       | 2538           | 2677            | 2799         |



Table 2 represents the total scores for each of the features of an effective logo as ranked by the respondents. Results indicate that the order in which these features are important to the publics (represented by academic staff of Arts and Education Faculties of University of Ibadan) that the organisations serve is 1) memorability 2) uniqueness 3) appropriateness and 4) attractiveness.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study has again confirmed the importance of representing a company graphically with an effective identity. If the identity fails in efficiently presenting verbal ideas by visual means, it has failed utterly. In most print advertisements today, press releases, anniversary celebrations, annual reports and accounts are started or ended with the company logos. Brochures are increasingly being used to complement public relations programmes. These are opportunities to attract attention of real and prospective consumers. Most important, corporate identities foster company goodwill — an essential ingredient in company survival.

When a company is creating a new name or symbol, consideration must be taken on the character of the product. The symbol and name have to focus on what is real, what is distinctive about the company or its products. The messages of corporate identity ranges from strength, definition of purpose and innovation to quality, public accountability, and tangible assets like people and experience. Corporate identity is a major corporate asset, especially when it makes management look at itself and its goals.

Factor (1984) asserts that the conceptual stage is the most difficult element in development of quality creative graphics. He suggests a few 'do's' and 'don'ts' in graphics development. To stress the need for PR practitioners to set a definite graphic objective and define it clearly, he quotes a philosophy which says: 'If you can't write your idea on the back of my business card, you haven't got a clear idea'. He further suggests that the practitioner should make sure that everyone involved in the project understands the intent. The stand of this researcher is in line with Factor's suggestion of the KISS formula: *Keep It Short and Simple*. That is the way to make it memorable. Selame (1984) presents what he calls Ten Commandments of Corporate Identity. The results of this study confirms, even in our environment, Selame's first and ninth commandments:

1st Commandment — 'Honour your company's philosophies, goals and marketing objectives.'

9th Commandment — 'Do not pollute the landscape with bad design.'

Finally, as recommended by the respondents of this study, memorability is to them the most important feature of a logo. For a logo to be remembered; it must be meaningful and pleasant to the beholder. When a company has a good image, the public is more likely to assume that it produces good products. The public is more likely to take the company's side in disputes if it is perceived favourably.

This study poses a challenge to PR practitioners who are about to design a new logo, or to change an existing one, or to evaluate the logo of their companies or their clients. The image of a corporate image must be positive. Corporate designs should speak louder than words.

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# CORPORATE SYMBOLS

## Appendix I.



NATIONAL BANK



SAVANNAH BANK



UNITED BANK FOR  
AFRICA LIMITED



WEMA BANK



LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY  
OF  
IFE



UNIVERSITY OF  
LAGOS



GOLDEN  
GUINEA  
BREWERIES



STANDARD  
BREWERIES  
(NIGERIA)  
LIMITED



EKO HOTELS  
LIMITED



MANDILAS



INTERNATIONAL  
INSTITUTE OF  
TROPICAL  
AGRICULTURE

NIGERIAN  
TOBACCO  
COMPANY



SEVEN UP  
BOTTLING  
COMPANY

NIGERIAN  
TELECOMMUNICA-  
TIONS LIMITED



TATE & LYLE  
(NIGERIA)  
LIMITED

NIGERIAN NATIONAL  
PETROLEUM  
CORPORATION



*Johnson & Johnson*  
JOHNSON & JOHNSON



NIGERIAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF  
MANAGEMENT



CONTINENTAL  
PHARMACEUTICALS  
LIMITED