Design: Voodoo signs of the business world What lawyers call the ...
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pg. 191

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Voodoo signs of the business world

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By Ada Louise Huxtable

It isn't only people who have identity crises. It's also corporations. A corporate identity crisis is a serious and expensive illness; curing it requires a specialist and the bill can reach a cool $1-million. The cure involves analysis—both of the company's image projection and problems—and prescription—a costly dose of design. The result is a symbol that is meant to express the corporate personality and identify it for the world. It is the voodoo sign of the business world.

Providing that corporate symbol, or image, is a process consisting of research, graphic design, an elaborate mystique and a great deal of artful persuasion. Depending on where you sit, it looks like the key that unlocks corporate success or a gigantic boondoggle. It is actually a little of both.

Once these symbols were simply called trademarks. More technically, the device is a logo, or logotype, which the dictionary defines as an identifying symbol, as for advertising. It is, specifically, a band of type in a special style, with or without a pictorial motif. It used to be hung on a sign or printed on an ad or on a package, and that was that. The nymph was White Rock, the calligraphic ribbon was Coca-Cola, the bearded gentlemen were the Smith Brothers, and they meant club soda, a soft drink and cough drops.

In more innocent, preconglomerate, premultinational days, at the start of the century, that was enough. No one expected the trademarks to mean solid corporate reliability or a gung-ho company with young ideas. Most businesses were producers of single items like shoes, rubber goods, compressors or cigars. The images, with a small boost from the beards or the nymphs, took care of themselves.

No longer. What lawyers call the "service mark" has been redefined and expanded into the "corporate identification program," or even more mysteriously, a "corporate communications system," as it is termed by one of the leading practitioners

An 1877 registration makes the Smith Brothers trademark one of the oldest in the United States.

of the art of providing such identities, Lippincott & Margulies. (This firm has cornered the market in sheer numbers of prestigious clients and over $8-million in annual revenues, not a little assisted by a polished hard sell.)

Perhaps the best definition was given by William Golden, designer of one of the most outstanding examples, the CBS eye. The corporate symbol has gone beyond the trademark to be "the total impression a company makes on the public through its products, its policies, its actions and its advertising effort."

Today the representation of this image is compounded of pseudo-scientific research heavy with psychological inferences (how the company is perceived and how it wants to be thought of) and massive wishful think (how a dynamic new image will transform the corporation in the public mind, in sales figures and in stock-market quotations). What is delivered, frequently with an awesome amount of documentation and double-talk, is a computer exercise in "corporate nomenclature" and its graphic expression. What this boils down to is a new name and trademark.

Why does a company spend anything from thousands to millions to make such a change? Because the companies themselves have changed. How to say that they now girdle the globe with more than shoe lasts and shoe brakes or rubber products? How to let their scope and power be known? Unfortunately, the new names bring a loss in language and specific image. Can you guess what Abex, Cominco, USM or Uniroyal represents?

Over a recent six-year period, one out of every 10 companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange, or about 100 to 150 a year, went in for some form of corporate name change or face-lift. The professional image-makers have been conspicuously ready to serve them. There are two firms that have gained specialized reputations in the field: Lippincott & Margulies and Chermayeff & Geismar. They are totally different in philosophy and practice. The first deals in a complex research-and-psychology mystique, and the second rests on an impeccable graphic-design reputation in both the business and art worlds.

They are often in competition for the same jobs. Both firms start by analyzing how a company functions and what it produces. But Lippincott & Margulies's design solution comes wrapped in the strokings of an extravagant package of samplings, opinion polls, projections, exotic language and behavioral assumptions which rank high among the salable black arts of 20th-century business practice. This security blanket offered to the

Amtrak, by Lippincott & Margulies.

corporate ego has a high price tag, and, some think, a highly subjective value.

In the end, however, it is only the design that counts. Lippincott & Margulies's results are extremely uneven, from very good to pretty bad. Their strong and suggestive name and arrow for Amtrak is excellent; the Chrysler logo (rumored to be one of those million-dollar jobs) is a bland mediocrity.

Coca-Cola, which "updated" its image in the nineteen-seventies and is estimated to have spent $12-million to $15-million to do so around the world, got its familiar unbeatable classic script with a ribbon shape added below, perfectly adequate but hardly, in Coca-Cola's words, "the most electrifying industrial drama on the soft drink scene for all time."

In contrast, Chermayeff & Geismar lacks hyperbole. "We stress logic. We very unscientifically come up with what we think is an appropriate solution," says Tom Geismar. "We don't believe that it can be measured or tested; there is no real way to know how people will react to something new."

Chermayeff & Geismar's work, across the board, is of consistently high quality. The graphics for Mobil and Seatrain, to name two projects, have characteristic strength and style. The identifying "2" of Boston's public television station, WGBH, conceived with the help of the Cambridge Seven group, is both imaginative and flexible—a "fat 2" always identifiable, even in the act of becoming something else (melting, waving or turning into a birthday cake or a promotional "twomobile"). On the other hand, the company that buys a "dynamic communications posture" may end up by getting a design dud.

And many get just that. Moreover, the current corporate practice of exchanging names for initials is an exercise in anonymity rather than in identity. Only something like IBM—its corporate personality well registered in the public mind and its successful logo created in the nineteen-sixties with absolutely no witch-doctoring, by Paul Rand — escapes becoming what many now see as alphabet soup. When a Radio Corporation of America becomes RCA, it works only because the public has the image first.

The Corn Products Company (golden visions) is now CPC International (guess what and who cares?). Vanity Fair Mills (two lovely, classy words) is the V. F. Corporation. National Dairy Products (farms and cows, now obsolete of course) is the harsh-sounding Kraftco.

Even government wants a new look today. There is now a "W" logo for Westchester, a symbol for the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration and an identity in preparation, by Chermayeff & Geismar, for the Environmental Protection Administration.

In the end, there is no real mystery about what makes a logo succeed. It must be unique, it must not go out of style, it must be workable for all applications and it must represent the corporation appropriately. It might be added that it should not debase the language—a largely unremarked result of the ubiquitous renaming.

There are genuine gains to be had from such programs. They frequently do pull together a corporate identity, uniting and improving the company's total graphics from logo to packaging, reducing and simplifying forms and procedures, sometimes at cost savings, making order out of chaos in multiple-division-and-product enterprises. Occasionally they even come up with a zinger of a name and style.

What is being sold, however, in many cases, is a different kind of psychology from that being pushed by the consultant researchers. There is the overwhelming American belief in change and up-to-dateness, with all of its false connotations of go-go progress and "modernity" for its own spurious sake. With this goes a desire for conformity. There is the need to be with-it and to keep up with the Joneses, and always, underlying, the desire for perpetual youth and virility and the wish to be on top of the latest thing, as expressed by a J. C. Penney spokesman after a visual corporate overhaul: "The name of the game is new."

But what is also being sold is fear. Fear of seeming fusty or weak—with the real fear of corporate take-over that this invites in the cannibalistic business world—fear of competition, fear of sliding sales, fear of not being one-up, fear of seeming old-hat. And so the rush to alphabet soup and wonder-working images goes on. It is a process that has become vastly overrated, overinflated and overpriced.

Occasionally, a hardy old image survives the busywork. Within the renamed Cominco, one traditional brand product remains. Elephant Fertilizer was too good to lose. ■