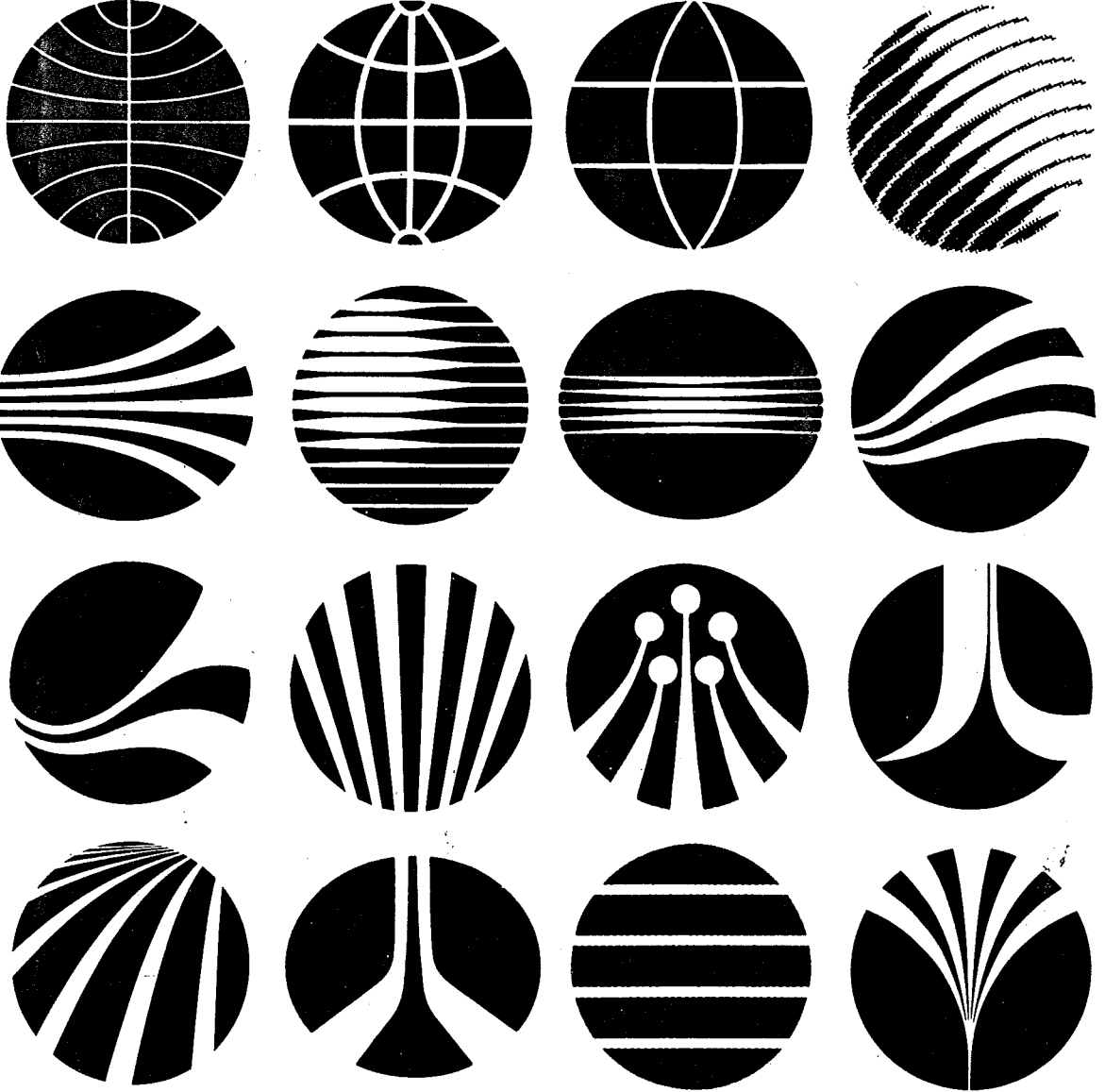


An Irreverent Look at Logotypes and Brandmarks

by: Jay Doblin

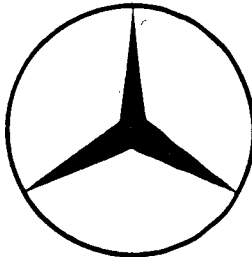
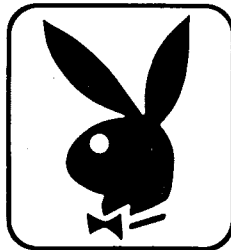
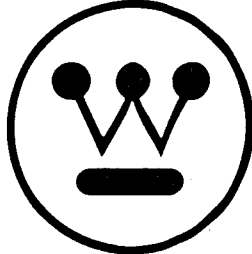
“However well designed a mark may be, it will fail to communicate when the viewer has not been told, in advance, what it’s supposed to mean.”



AN IRREVERENT LOOK AT LOGOTYPES AND BRANDMARKS

by Jay Doblin

A selection of marks that represent typical object, letter, human, vegetable, animal, and geometric designs.



For the designer, few things are more intriguing than trademarks. Designers love to make marks, it's the ultimate aesthetic game. But there's a hitch, the design process employed for most trademarks becomes fruitless exercise. It doesn't produce what it's supposed to produce, communication. Art it might be; communication it is not.

To explain this assertion, it might be a good idea to define some terms, to risk boring the reader with some basics.

It is said that there are more than 450,000 trademarks out there, competing for attention in an extremely noisy marketplace. An average consumer may screen hundreds of marks an hour in a market, on the street, reading a newspaper, etc.

Now we're getting really basic, but bear with me. Trademarks are generally divided into two broad categories: logotypes, which are distinctively designed, readable letterforms, and marks, which are distinct visual forms. Marks are simplified object forms, letter forms, human forms, vegetable forms, animal forms and, perhaps most common, geometric forms. At this point, it may be nearly impossible to design a clearable basic mark.

However well designed a mark may be, it will fail to communicate when the viewer has not been told, in advance, what it's supposed to mean. Failure to know that a red disc on a white field means *Japan* is a 100% loss of communication. Look through a book of trademarks and count those you recognize. It will probably be five percent (and these are a selection of the best).

Because it is not immediately identifiable, the purveyors of a new mark have to go through the trouble of penetrating the marketplace by constantly identifying it by name. AT&T's new "blue globe" is a good example. It always has the company name under it or next to

it so everyone knows that this trite symbol stands for AT&T. The globe cannot be used alone; it could mean Minolta or a dozen others. You begin to wonder why it's used at all. It's a piece of junk jewelry that's added for decoration. A well designed AT&T logo would be far quicker and surer.

For efficiency, impact and recognizability, it makes sense to me to go with a logotype.

There is absolutely no reason the principles of good design cannot be applied to a letter form to create a mark that reflects the objectives of the organization and that is easily recognized by the reader or viewer. I know it's fashionable to say IBM provides the best example of a successful logotype, but it is, by every known scale. Others come to mind: Coca-Cola, 3M, Xerox. Like marks, logotypes can be recognized rather than read if the viewer is already familiar with it. But unlike marks, logotypes can be read (assuming literacy on the part of the viewer) and identified even if the reader has never heard of the organization or seen any of its symbols.

Now, many an eager designer has been known to digest this information, say "Aha" and run out and design a typeset logo. The next step is to eyeball it and tell yourself, "It needs something more to give it distinction." So you add what I call a noodnik, a visual appendage that adds nothing to the communicability of the form or has anything to do with the communicability of the form or has anything to do with the company, its resources or its marketplace. The noodnik's sole purpose is to personalize this typeset logotype from several thousand others.

Arco is an example of a typographic word with a noodnik stuck on the end (I've replaced Arco's noodnik with Sperry's). One of the best logos is Tom Geismar's *Mobil*. Simple letter

EAT•N

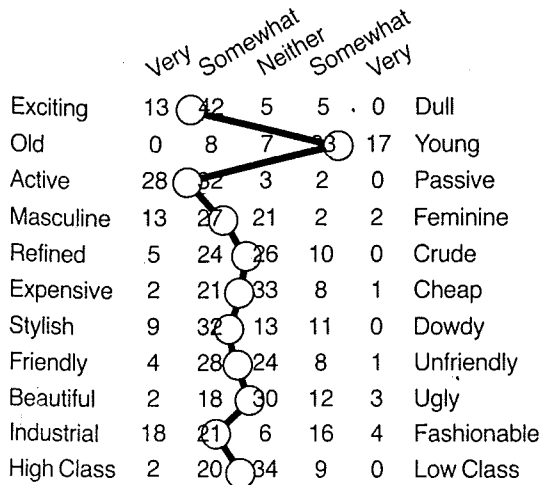
IBM

Mobil

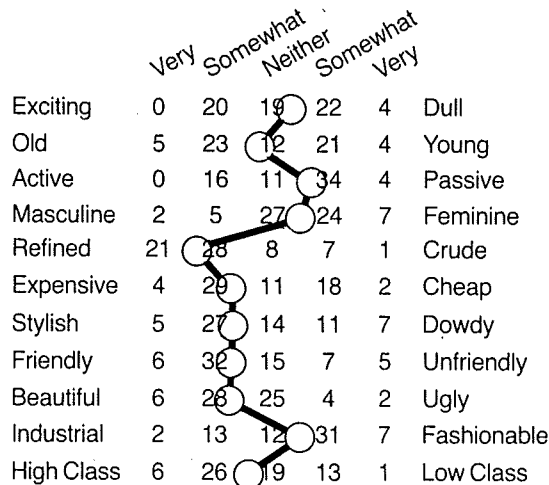


ARCO 

ESSAIR



PJConner



A mark by any other name... which logo is appropriate for a stylish retailer?

forms gain distinction with a red "O." His idea has been knocked off many times as an alternative to a noodnik. Not that using a logotype, sans noodnik, guarantees a well-designed symbol. When I first saw the new Sears logo, I thought that it may radiate some inappropriate imagery. Sears senior management calls it symbolic of "a strong, self-assured company" suggesting "variety, something new and dynamic." To check, we did a semantic differential test with 65 design students ranging from freshmen to graduates. Two logos were shown, these represented the form of Sears and JCPenney. The reason for testing form representations was to unload the retailers' image content from the form of both logos.

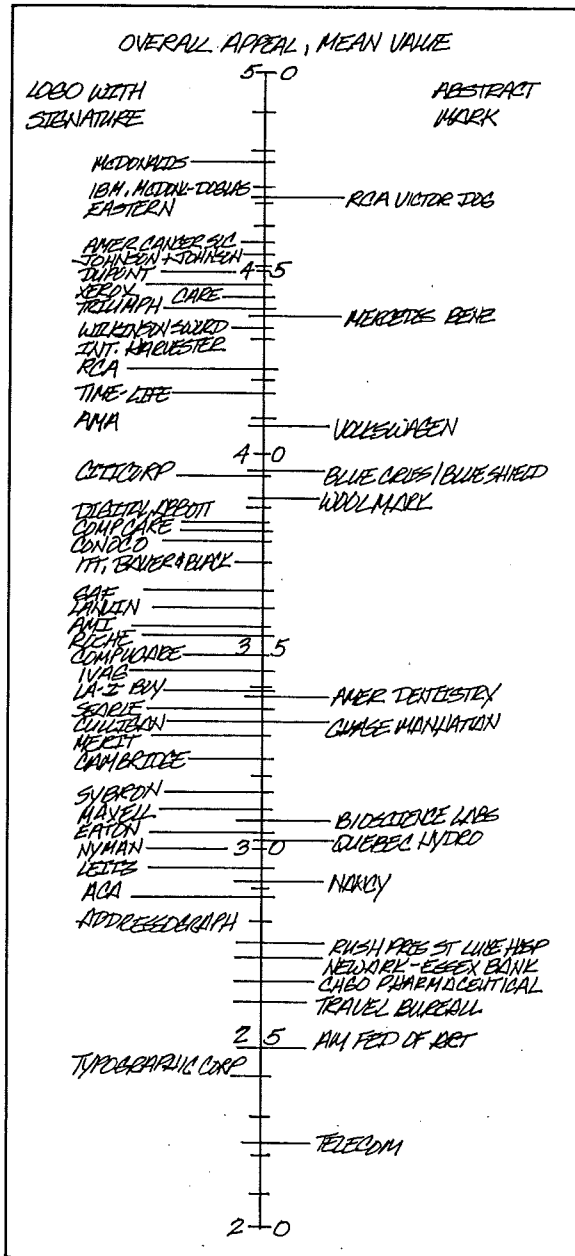
The test confirmed that Sears logo is somewhat exciting, young and active. But it's also seen as somewhat masculine and industrial. The strong, fat, italicized letters give it power; the inlines of the logo enough detail to keep it from becoming too crude and unfashionable. The representation of JCPenney's logo is generally neutral, but scores well on refinement, fashionable, and femininity.

Although the profiles of both logos are reasonably well suited to their respective companies concepts, both could use some adjusting. This image adjustment could come from the design and content of the items on which they're used and the size and color of the logos application.

10	20	30	40	50	60

A selection of 34 of the 60 trademarks studied by the American Hospital Association. McDonalds did best with a score of 5.8 on a 6.0 scale.

A scale shows the ratings of all 60 marks tested. Note the inversion of the number of logos to marks.



The challenge in doing a logo is to achieve distinction with swinging elegance. It is easy to be elegant and dull. It is easy to be swinging and vulgar. It takes a great designer to combine the better qualities.

Compare the Sears logotype with that of Eaton, which might be the most clever recent logo in existence. It exploits the overlap of letters so common in cartoons, yet with crisp, custom-drawn alternately reversed letters. Actually I hate its trickiness, but it's damned clever and unique.

We talk about strong, clean design as if it were a dictum that came down from The Mountain. Actually, strong and clean aren't always appropriate, not if you want to project, say, a product with a feminine image, or one with high class or high precision. There are scales to measure these things by; they're crude but they do exist.

John Bisinger, Director of Marketing Services at the American Hospital, did a research study to measure the general appeal marks have for consumers and to statistically relate consumer ratings with designer ratings of the same marks. If a high relationship existed between the two sets of ratings, a predictive model could be developed. Such a model would allow a designer to develop a mark, evaluate it in terms of aesthetics, and project its communication appeal for an audience.

The first part of this project dealt with consumer evaluation of trademarks. How do consumers rate trademarks on various measurement scales? How many points separate the "appealing" from the "unappealing." What percentage of consumer ratings make a trademark "successful" from their point of view? How high is high?

To do this initially, a sample of 180 respondents were shown 60 trademarks. These trademarks were carefully

selected to represent a range of type and kinds of marks and companies. Each was rated for overall appeal, quality, understandability and professionalism.

A selection of 24 of these trademarks is shown here in order of their overall preference. Some conclusions can be drawn. Respondents appear to prefer marks that are: lighter, more literal, more verbal, more easily understood, self-explanatory, and conservative. Note that the most ambiguous marks fared the worst.

These excerpts are the sketchiest summary of what was found. From what was learned it seems possible to develop a predictive method that could "measure" the acceptance of proposed marks.

The point is, designers need the support of objective information. The time has come to begin designing intelligently instead of intuitively. The bet has become too big and the game too complicated to continue doing it the old fun-and-games way. ●