Logo Design Primer

A Guide to Logos and the Logo Design Process

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Introduction

Of all the design projects that I've worked on, logos have always been my favorite. They have also been the most challenging and, at times, quite difficult to properly execute. But, when a design is complete and I am looking at what will become the new mark of an organization, business, product, or individual, in it I see their future. A logo is one of the best places to begin when branding or rebranding. I view it as the foundation upon which wider, more enveloping brand decisions are made. With a strong, well designed logo, other creative ideas can follow, feeding off the visual and aesthetic energy of a new design.

I created this primer as a guide to help familiarize readers with the various types of logos, the purpose they serve, and how best to approach designing them. As with all forms of creativity, learning to craft a well designed logo takes time. I will admit to creating logos that, in retrospect, I wish never made it into production. But with practice, patience and perseverance, soon you will find yourself designing logos that will not only satisfy your clients needs but your own love of creativity as well.

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The Logo

So, just what is a logo? In literal terms, a logo is defined as a symbolic image, often accompanied by words, that makes a visual statement about an individual, business, product, or service. But, it is what lies beyond the literal that better serves to define a logo.

A logo serves one purpose, to convey a message. This message is very rarely literal in nature, and more often than not, is part of a larger story. For example, a logo for a business does not literally tell the viewer what the organization's mission is, but rather, visually sets a tone in which this message is implied. If the business is a formal organization then the logo may be traditional, conservative, and subdued in nature. If the business is centered around entertainment then a logo that is expressive, energetic, and colorful may be more meaningful. It is the perceived message of a viewer that brings meaning and value to a logo.

A (Very) Brief History

We unavoidably live in a world that surrounds us with logos—illustrative and typographic representations of businesses and products of all types. From the moment we awake until we head back to sleep, we are consciously and unconsciously bombarded by logos. The next time you are in your car driving through town, walking through a store, or watching television, count how many times you see a logo, you will shortly be overwhelmed for sure.

So how did this happen? And, why is it we live in a culture that uses this ever-present form of communication? The answers lie within human nature and history. By nature we are visual creatures with a unique ability to view, analyze, and decipher patterns, shapes, dimension, and colors. Our earliest form of writing was with the use of pictographs, examples of which have been discovered in Egypt and Mesopotamia dating back earlier than 5000 years.

In early civilizations symbols were used by tradespeople as a way to mark their goods. An individual used a unique mark applied to sealed trade vessels as a way to associate themselves with the products they contained. Images and monogram-like symbols were added to monetary coins to represent the ruler or government in power when they were minted. Emblems and crests were used throughout the middle-ages to identify ruling kings and armies, and can be found throughout the history of religion.

As humans moved from an agrarian culture into what became the industrial revolution the idea of marking manufactured products took hold. So much was now being created for mass consumption that product recognition was imperative in differentiating unique items produced by competing businesses. In the late nineteenth-century advancements in marketing, printing, and manufacturing added to the ease in which products could be labeled and sold.

By the mid twentieth-century, the concept of mass marketing and branding was in full swing. Marketing agencies worked to out bid each other for a chance to develop unique identities, brands, and marketing opportunities for anyone with a budget and a product to sell.

This brings us to today. Logos, and the messages they are attached to, may seem like a visually cluttered scar across our urban landscape, but as humans this is how we fundamentally recognize and associate with businesses, products, and brands. This is how we think and this is why logos work so well. In a sense, not so different from the early forms of pictography used for communication dating back to antiquity.

Types of Logos

Logos come in endless forms and styles. Depending on who you ask, how logos are categorized will vary from one answer to the next. Within these categories logos may include images, abstract symbols, various typographical treatments, and more. The following is a list, with descriptions, of common logos followed by examples of popular designs that take advantage of these various logo types. It is up to the designer to decide which type of logo best represents the organization, business, product, or brand they are designing for.

Pictorial Marks, Combination Marks, and Brandmarks

A pictorial mark is a drawing or image that serves as a visual identifier. They can range from simple line drawings to more complex illustrations. Pictorial marks generally require the addition of words to aid in getting a message across to the viewer. Pictorial marks with words, such as a business or product name, are known as combination marks. Overtime, as recognition grows, the words may be dropped and the mark can serve as the only needed element in representation. Known as brandmarks, good examples of strong brands that can rely on pictorial marks alone are Nike, Starbucks, Apple, and Shell Oil Company.

Puma, Chick-fil-a, Levi's, and Transamerica Combination Mark Logos

Starbucks, Apple, Shell, Chanel, and Amazon Brandmark Logos

Abstract and Symbolic Marks

Abstract and symbolic marks are designs consisting of nonliteral representation. Being abstract or symbolic, the logo can be interpreted in interesting and creative ways. An abstract mark may have no visually recognizable elements but posses a strong, lasting visual impact, whereas, a symbolic mark, that at first appears abstract, can cary meaning once the brand it represents becomes known. Abstract and symbolic marks are open to interpretation, keep this in mind when designing in this style as everyone interprets images differently. As with pictorial marks, abstract and symbolic marks also benefit from the addition of words to strengthen the visual message, though with time and brand strength they may be dropped.

Chase, Target, Adidas, Nike, and CBS Abstract and Symbolic Mark Logos

Typographic

Typographic logos consist only of words or letters but can convey a sense of style and translate a message just as well as a logo containing an image. Typographic logos break down into four categories: wordmarks, lettermarks, and letterforms.

A wordmark, also known as a logotype, is a logo that utilizes text alone to display the name of a business, product, or brand. Wordmark designs can be executed using existing fonts, by customizing a fonts typeface, or creating a new hand-drawn design from scratch. Some organizations have gone as far as having proprietary fonts developed unique only to them. One has to look no further than Coca-Cola to see the value and strength in a wordmark design.

Lettermarks, also known as monograms and abbreviations, are logos that contain two or more typographic characters, usually containing the initials of a business, individual, or organization. With a shortened name and clever use of typography, lettermarks can add a personal touch to a design while making them more memorable. The IBM logo is a great example of a design utilizing initials, as I, B, and M are the initials of the original company name, International Business Machines.

Letterforms are logos created using a single letter, usually the first letter of the business, product, or brand it represents. If a company's brand recognition is well established letterforms can be extremely strong designs due to their directness and simplicity.

Canon, Eddie Bauer, and Coca-Cola Wordmark Logos

IBM, BBC, NASA, New York Yankees, and GE Lettermarks

Walgreens, Honda, McDonald's, Netflix, Facebook, and Adobe Letterform Logos

Emblems

An emblem is a logo that includes a surrounding shape to help strengthen and solidify a logo. An emblem can enclose a name or a name with an illustration. Take for instance emblems that have historical roots and can still be seen in government seals and family crests. Emblems are very popular with logos created for food products, auto manufacturers, hotels, and sports franchises.

Harley-Davidson, UPS, Dos Equis, Volkswagen, and Ford Emblem Logos

Mascots and Characters

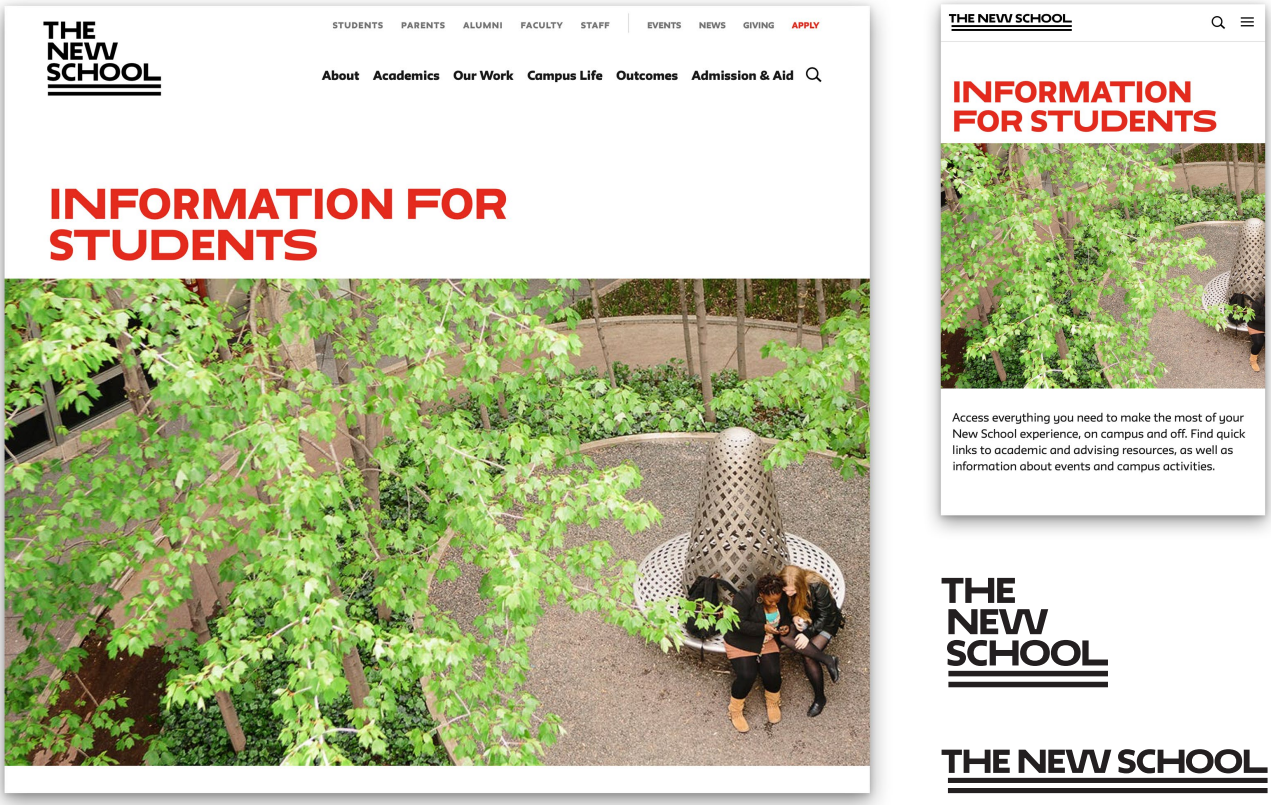
A logo containing a mascot or character is one that utilizes a stylized representation of a human, animal, or anthropomorphized figure. Generally a business or product that uses a character in a logo design can be seen as more entertaining and less serious, and the character can go on to develop a brand of its own. Mr. Monopoly (who was originally named Rich Uncle Pennybags) is a great example of character usage. Sports franchises also make strong use of characters in their logos. A logo that uses a character can evoke the feeling of youthful fun and at times appear childlike, but that is not to say a well executed character can not represent any business, product, or brand. Puma and Jaguar are good examples.

Aflac, Mailchip, Monopoly, Geico Mascot and Character Logos

Dynamic and Adaptive Marks

The avenues in which businesses reach their target audience varies greatly. Print media, television, the Internet, and apps are good examples. As long as a logo stays true to its original form and continues to convey the intended brand message, adding a sense of dynamism to a static design can heighten a viewers experience. Varying image, alternating colors, and adding motion are ways in which logos can be dynamically enhanced. More literally, logos can also be adaptive to the medium in which they are viewed. A larger, more complex, logo can be downsized and simplified to fit the needs of smaller display sizes to maintain legibility and visibility.

Museum of Arts and Design Dynamic Logos



The New School Website with Adaptive Logo on Varying Display Sizes

A Successful Logo

On the surface a logo may appear to be a simple and even obvious answer to what is actually a complex problem. How is it that designers can go from thoughts on paper and information gathered from clients to a well polished, well received, and well crafted logo design? There is actually quite a lot to keep in mind when designing a logo. Listed below are key principles that serve as the foundation of a successful logo design.

Memorable

A successful logo is a memorable logo. If a logo is to make a lasting impression on its target audience than it has to stick. A logo that does not make a lasting impression will be forgotten along with the message, business, or product it represents.

Message

A logo might not be able to convey every message needed to tell the entire story of a brand. And, it probably shouldn't. That would be way too much information to force into what should be a simple, concise, easy to digest image. The best approach is to pick a singular, powerful message that draws the viewer in, then excites them enough to want to learn more about what the logo represents.

Relevance

A logo must be relevant to the subject matter it represents. If there is a disconnect between a logo and its subject then the message it portrays becomes muddled and can confuse rather than reinforce that message.

Simplicity

The simpler a design, the faster it is for individuals to visually process, and the quicker it can be processed the easier it is for the logo to be remembered. On the technical side, a simple logo is easier to apply to any application. A logo must hold up and be readable when applied to everything from stationary and small advertisements, to large signage and billboards.

Originality

If a logo looks like, or shares similar characteristics with another logo, especially a popular logo or a logo that shares the same market space, then the design can lead to confusion. If a logo is to stand out from the crowd and send a unique message then having a logo that is as original as possible will aid in its reception and memorability with the public and will not be confused for another. Even worse, an unoriginal or borrowed design can aid in enhancing the brand of the competition.

Versatility and Growth

Versatility in a logos design will allow it to grow with the organization, product, or brand it represents. A design that loses relevance before it has a chance to grab a foothold in the marketplace will force a redesign and hurt the brand that it represents.

Application

Understanding the many applications of a logo and all the ways in which it may be applied is extremely important. A logo may find itself being added to websites, stationary, brochures, posters, signs, and billboards. A logo that looks just as strong on the tiniest of stitched tags or specialty product imprints, to the largest of signs and even digital billboards, is a well designed logo.

Avoiding Trends

As with anything trends come and go, and the same holds true for logo designs. Except for the rare occasion when a logos lifespan is short term, say for an annual event or fundraiser, designers should avoid trends. Trends will date a logo very fast and force a redesign sooner than is necessary. One of the main purposes of a logo is to develop brand recognition. If a logo becomes dated then the brand will be perceived as dated. Also, once a logo becomes dated it will need to be updated. Brands develop over time and a logo that requires frequent updates will only serve to weaken a brands strength.

Brand Image

A logo is often mistaken as being an organizations brand or brand image. Actually, a brand image is comprised of all aspects of a business including products, advertisement, customer service, physical stores, websites, etc. A logo serves as the introduction, and many times the focal point of the brand image. It is important that a logo make a good impression and lead viewers down the right path, enabling them to explore and understand the entire brand experience.

Designing A Logo

In a way, logo design is similar to a puzzle, and it is your job to connect all the pieces into a final product. The pieces of the puzzle include information given to you by a client, content you have gathered while doing research, and creative ideas you develop while conceptualizing the design. These pieces come together while crafting the final design and in preparing final artwork for delivery. Below are important steps to consider when developing a logo design. They are the pieces of the puzzle.

Research

Before you begin a logo design project, it is important that you conduct research. First, you need to research the organization that you are designing the logo for. Learn everything you can about the organizations products, services, brand, market space, history, etc. Also, research the competition to see what others, providing a similar service, are doing to achieve the same goals. Finally, do some research on your logo concepts themselves to make sure that your design ideas do not conflict with another businesses existing design.

Design Brief

When working with a customer it may be difficult to get them to explain just what it is they are looking for and the goals they are trying to achieve. Also, in many cases, there will be multiple people involved in the design direction and decision making process. One way to get as much up front information as possible, so there is no miscommunication or misunderstanding, is to work with a client in developing a design brief. A design brief serves as a definitive guide of the clients goals, requirements, and expectations. A design brief will also help in keeping a project on track. Additional work requested after the project begins, that is not included in the design brief, should be viewed as additional work beyond the original scope of the agreement. This work can either be postponed for a later date or used to renegotiate the final cost of the project.

Inspiration

There truly is no shortage of visual inspiration. Rresources such as logo and design books and websites are full of great inspirational work. Spend some time looking at other creative works and see if they spark conceptual ideas for your project. Then spend some time just looking around your environment. Nature, man-made objects, abstract shapes, etc., can all provide inspirational feedback when processing creative ideas. These visual influences can inspire and form the foundation of any design.

Conceptualizing

Now that you have done your research and have gathered information from your client it is time to bring all the information together and start conceptualizing ideas. I like to call this process visual brainstorming. Just as concepts and ideas are brainstormed using thought clouds and white boards, the same process can be used in design. Take pen to paper and start roughing out ideas in a loose, casual nature. Not only will this process allow you to rapidly work out initial design ideas, it also will serve to loosen up your creative thinking.

Sketching

After working out initial concepts it is time to start streamlining your ideas in a more formal manner. Bringing together your creative thoughts through the process of sketching will help work out the design kinks during creative development. Sketching serves as a way to focus on what works and what doesn't. It is through the processes of reworking creative ideas that strengthens the concepts that best serve as the foundation to the final design.

Moving to the Computer

Once a design concept has been streamlined through sketching it is time to move to the computer. Everyone has their preferred method of working through the design process on a computer; scanning a chosen sketch to serve as a traceable image, working from scratch with sketches by their side as references, and so on. How you proceed with your ideas on a computer will take time to establish until you find a workflow that is best for you.

There is one important thing that every designer must recognize when going digital, and that is working in an application that allows you to craft a design in vector format. For almost all designers, the application of choice is Adobe® Illustrator®. An application like Adobe® Photoshop®, as powerful as it is, does not produce vector art, but rather produces pixel based files. Working in a vector based application is important for the following reasons:

- Provides clean, easy to work with vector based artwork
- Vector files can always be rasterized but not the other way around
- Contains specialized tools created for illustrative purposes
- Offers versatility in the design process
- Easier logo artwork creation and revising
- Unlimited artwork scalability for clean reproduction in any application

Typography

Every logo in one form or another uses type. This can be a business or product name, company or personal initials, and sometimes a tag line to reinforce the logo's message. Knowing how best to choose typefaces and the pitfalls to avoid when deciding on type is important. Just as with graphics used in logo design, typographic choices need to complement the businesses or products they represent. And, matching the right typeface to a pictorial mark, if used, is an art within itself. Working with typography also allows for a certain level of creativity. Modifying and customizing an existing typeface and even generating one completely from scratch can add to the visual value of a logo.

Putting Together the Pieces

When working with multiple elements in a logo design, like graphics, type, and taglines, knowing how best to arrange them can make or break a logo's final composition. Balance, alignment, proportions, and managing the finer details all play a key role in how a logo visually comes together.

Color

An important aspect in any form of design is working with color. A logo may be the beginning of brand development, so the color choices made when designing a logo will have a lasting effect for years to come. When working with color, understanding how to choose a pallet that best represents the subject matter, knowing how color translates to print and electronic media, and even the effect it has in human psychology all play an important role.

The Importance of Black and White

Inevitably there will come a time when a logo needs to be reproduced in a solid, one color format. I can not stress enough how important it is that a logo look just as good in color as it does in solid black and white. There are many reasons for this, not every application of a logo can be reproduced in its original color format. A solid one color logo may be needed for an imprint on a specialty product, placement on letterhead designed for printing on black and white laser printers, a simple one color advertisement, or some other implementation where a logo can only be used in a single solid color. When beginning the creative process keep this in mind as you will also need to be aware of how your final design will hold up in these types of applications.

Application and Versatility

Creating a logo that holds up in black and white is only one example of the many applications where a logo may need to meet special reproduction requirements. How a logo looks printed in both large and small sizes, used in special print finishing like embossing, stitched into fabric, and printed on unique materials, are other examples of how a logo may be utilized.

Even logos as complex as those for Cadillac and John Deere can be represented well in a one color solid.

Working With Clients

Though the purpose of this primer is describing the process of designing logos, I do want to include a brief section about working with clients. The following are some things to consider when working with others to avoid some of the common pitfalls that can occur between designers and clients.

Control

We have all heard the phrase “The customer is always right”. Don’t believe it. You have been hired for your design knowledge, skills, and abilities, this is what you are being paid for, this is your time to take charge and let your experience and knowledge guide you. Part of your responsibility as the designer is to help lead your customer in understanding the process and in making the right decisions. The last thing you want is for a logo design to become a runaway project with too many individuals making too many suggestions and treating the project as an open free-for-all.

Communication

Be clear about the decisions you make and how they impact the design. Explain to your client how your design reflects their product, business, or brand. If you feel that things might begin to lead down an unproductive path, explain that to them. Help clarify the original goals of the project. And, if you are working from a design brief, use it as a tool to steer the project back on track.

Project Creep

If a project starts to grow in scope and you find that you may be required to develop additional concepts or create other material, make it clear to them that this goes beyond the original agreement and that it will impact the final cost of the project. You are the designer, your time is valuable and your clients need to be aware that they will be accountable for any extra services that they request.

Preparing the Final Logo for Delivery

Once a logo design has been chosen there are a few more details that need to be worked out before the final product can be delivered to a client. Properly crafting the final artwork, file preparation, and usage guidelines complete the design process and provide your client with the necessary artwork and tools. Let’s look at each of these and the best way to approach project completion.

Craftsmanship

There is nothing worse than receiving a digital file for production only to find that it has been so poorly built that it is all but unusable. Even though a logo might look great on a computer display that does not mean that it has been built in a way that can be used in other forms of reproduction. Designers may work viscerally when creating and working through the approval process, but once a logo is accepted it is the designers responsibility to make sure the final deliverables are created as clean and easy to work with as possible. See an example on the following page of the Dallas Mavericks logo before and after a well-crafted rebuild.

Craftsmanship: Dallas Mavericks Logo Before and After Rebuild

Original Logo

Poorly Crafted Use of Shapes

Before: All elements of the original logo disassembled containing extra shapes, mismatched colors, and stroked and duplicate elements.

Rebuilt logo

Properly Crafted Use of Shapes

Black
(Print Ready CMYK)
100% Black

Blue
(Brand Specified Color)
Pantone 2935

Silver
(Brand Specified Color)
Pantone 877

White
(Print Ready CMYK)
0% Tint of 100% Black

After: All of the necessary elements to construct the logo reduced down to four easily definable shapes.

Artwork Preparation

Once a design is complete you have one last chance to make sure everything is in order before handing the final product over to your client. Now is the time to double check all aspects of your design before it is too late. Test print your design at various sizes to make sure the colors and artwork hold up. And, to reinforce the above, double check that your artwork has been crafted correctly. Then double check the file verifying that any unused design elements, colors in the color pallet, or file layers have been deleted and removed.

File Types

As previously mentioned, a vector formatted file is the type of format you should create a logo in. Even if a client does not initially understand the meaning of a vector file type, vendors that take possession of a logo from a client will, and they generally request a vector file format. But this is not the only file type that should be delivered to a client. Listed below are the common types of files that should be generated for clients and the purposes they serve.

- **Adobe® Illustrator® and EPS:** The two most common vector format file types. An EPS can be saved from within Illustrator.
- **PDF:** Though harder to work with, a PDF file can also be a vector file. Some vendors may request a PDF over an Adobe Illustrator or EPS file as PDF files are more versatile. A PDF file is also an open file format, so if a client can not open or view an Illustrator or EPS file, they will be able to view a PDF.
- **JPEG:** Adobe Illustrator and EPS files are best for printers, manufacturers, etc., that a client might work with to produce artwork, but there are also times when a client needs to produce art in-house. The file that is easiest to work with for people using applications like the Microsoft Office suite is a JPEG file. Just be sure to create a version of sufficient size and resolution so when printed the image quality holds. Remember, JPEGs are raster based files and not vector.
- **Adobe® Photoshop®:** Some vendors prefer to work with Photoshop files. Converting vector files into a Photoshop files gives your client one additional file type to add to their library. Photoshop files are also raster based documents, so be sure to convert them into a file of sufficient size and resolution. Newer versions of Photoshop do offer options for creating layers that contain vector artwork. If you know for sure that a client or vendor has a compatible version of Photoshop this option may be best.

Once you begin to create the various file types to provide to a client, you may want to take the time to do the same for every color version of a logo; spot, CMYK, RGB, grayscale, black and white, etc.

Usage Guidelines

Usage guidelines are documents that demonstrate how a logo should be implemented in various use cases. A guideline can be as simple as a single page instructional guide or an intensive multi-page brochure. It can even be incorporated into a complete brand usage guide book. This step of the process may or may not be required depending on the client's needs and should be viewed as a separate project garnering additional costs. But, if requested, can make a great addition to the final logo design ensuring that its integrity holds up when being used by others.

Jung von Matt Advertising Agency
Great example of negative space used to define various surface planes.

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