

# Notes on Better Identity Design

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EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY

2D CORE DESIGN STUDIO IV / DESN 310 / FALL 2011

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***“A good logo can never make a bad product better, but a good logo can make a good product spectacular”***

Paul Rand

***“Never give the client what he expects.”***

David Hillman

***“Generally, we think that successful logos should express as much as possible with the greatest economy of form... when designing a logo, distill, distill, distill, distill, and distill.”***

Diti Katona

## The ‘Masters’ of Identity Design

Although symbols, letters and icons have been used to identify entities as diverse as families and countries for thousands of years, when we refer to masters of the art of identity design we generally mean people who set standards of excellence in the field in fairly recent times, innovators whose work is still relevant today. Among these designers and firms are Paul Rand (a theorist and author as well as a ground-breaking designer), Saul Bass, William Golden, Chermayeff and Geismar, Massimo Vignelli, and Pentagram. Then there are the big Madison Avenue (Manhattan) advertising agencies that specialise in corporate branding of the world’s biggest brands, agencies like Lippincott or Landor Associates.

In the wake of globalization, multiculturalism, and the exponential growth of messages and new technologies, the practice of identity design is more complex than ever before, and the task of distinguishing products, services and organisations from thousands of similar entities has become increasingly challenging. Small wonder that identity designers no longer confine themselves exclusively to the fashioning of exquisite marks and typography; they often assist in the creation of corporate personality, naming and copy writing, positioning and the articulation of organizational values.

## Learning from the Masters

There are no hard and fast rules for the design of identities, nor should there be; but there are some useful guidelines such as those found in books and websites. Many top designers publish their own lists of dos and don’ts, some of which are reproduced here:

### Top Five Logo Design Rules: Gottschalk + Ash International

Logos must;

1. Be harmonious
2. Be concise
3. Contain a cognitive element
4. Withstand wear and tear
5. Be timeless

### Top Seven Rules for Logo Failure: Debbie Millman, Sterling Brands

1. A logo that’s the face of an organization that is badly marketed
2. Global logos that do not consider global interpretations
3. Logos that need an explanation
4. Overly ‘trendy’ logos
5. Logos that require complicated production techniques
6. Logos that require in-depth training to educate users
7. Logos with multiple taglines or messages that are not always in sync

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## Five Logo Design Rules: Matteo Bologna, Mucca Design

- 1 Remember that the logo/mark will be reproduced very small
- 2 Design for the client, not your portfolio
- 3 But if it isn't worthy of your folio, why show it to the client
- 4 Design ten logos, present only 2 or 3 of them, and never show the ones you don't like because they are bound to be the ones picked.
- 5 Ignore all the above and try to have fun

## Advise for Identity Designers: Steff Geisbuhler, C & G Partners

### 1 Listen objectively to the client's description of the problem.

Do intensive research, interviewing the top people in the organization, the people who embody the company, who'll deal with the identity on a day-to-day basis. Include members of their anticipated audience.

### 2 Evaluate the problem in the context of current and future needs.

Don't only depict the organization as it is today, but how it wants to be perceived in the future.

### 3 Define a conceptual approach to begin design development.

Ask these questions: What makes sense—changing the name or abbreviating the name? Is a symbol or mark more appropriate? Or is the name by itself more powerful and unique?

### 4 Create a series of design possibilities, while weeding out the merely fashionable.

Otherwise known as thinking, sketching, trying out, and exploring, while avoiding cliches and trendy expressions.

### 5 Present the proposed design with examples of the mark in use.

Show a logo in a wide variety of applications and contexts. These applications should be the most relevant ones for that specific entity.

### 6 Guide effective implementation and evolution.

Rather than relying on elaborate printed guidelines and manuals, produce a master disc containing only the most basic rules and specifications. In cases where a large number of people in different locations need to have access to the art and specifications, put extensive graphic guidelines on a company's website.

## Michael Bierut, Pentagram: Top 10 Logo Design Rules

- 1 A logo isn't everything. A company's image is the sum total of many different factors. Sticking a clever logo on a stupid piece of communication gets a client nowhere. Make sure the company looks, sounds, and feels smart in every way, every time it goes to the public. This is actually better than a logo.
- 2 Relentless consistency is your secret weapon. Companies with long graphic identities have built them through years of use. Here's some free advice. Pick a typeface. Pick a color. Use them over and over and over again, on everything. Before long you'll find yourself with an identifiable look and feel. Again, this is more valuable than a logo, not the other way around.
- 3 Don't assume that shapes and colors have magical meanings. Does baby blue say "luxury" to you? It does when it's in a box from Tiffany. The Nike executives who picked the

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swoosh did it as a reluctant compromise; what they really wanted was stripes, like Adidas. Logos are just holders for meaning. It's the company that gives meaning to the logo, not the other way around.

4 Be simple. Some of the best logos are the simplest logos. One of the oldest is the mark used by the Bass brewery: It's a red triangle. Target has made a red circle with a red dot in the middle seem the very essence of affordable, hip and practicality. How H&R Block is trying to claim a green square. It will probably work. Simple things are easy to remember and tend not to date as quickly.

5 Leave it open. Don't try to make a logo that will explain at a glance to everyone who sees it the complete nature of your company's history, its business plan, its organizational structure, and its product lines. You will not succeed. This is a good thing. A logo that raises a question and is open to interpretation is better than one that attempts to contain all the answers.

6 Know your audience. Who is your audience? The whole wide world? Or just a few dozen customers? Too often, logo design is an internal exercise with predictably arcane results. Never forget that at the end of the day, the design that you do only works when it works for people who haven't been in all the meetings, and who are just going to encounter your message briefly in the course of a busy day.

7 Do good work.

8 Don't be embarrassed. Well-made and attractive is better than cheap and ugly. This is true for products, and it's true for the tools you use to communicate. Quality counts. Everyone's got a budget. Consider doing a little bit less and a little bit better. Make everything used to communicate as good as it can be. Logos and colors can be considered cosmetic, and hardheaded business people sometimes avoid focusing on them. But most design-driven companies got that way thanks to a highly-placed advocate, from Thomas Watson at IBM in the sixties, to Steve Jobs at Apple today. For a design program to work, it needs to be seen as important to important people. Care about it.

9 Get good advice. Common sense works well. But sooner or later, a professional graphic designer is needed for help. AIGA is the largest professional organization for graphic designers. The AIGA website, [www.aiga.org](http://www.aiga.org), has advice about how to find and work with them.

10 Be a good company. IBM President (1952-1971), Thomas Watson Jr. is credited with saying, "Good design is good business." He also pointed out that a good design can help a bad product fail faster. Your brand is a promise. It's up to you to see to it that your products and services deliver on that promise. America's all-time greatest logo designer, the late Paul Rand, created logos for IBM, Westinghouse, ABC Television, and UPS. His last logo was for a company you may have heard of called Enron. It's actually a good logo.