



Brand recognition: abstract shape, concrete success

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Brand Recognition: Abstract Shape, Concrete Success

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All around us we see brand-owners continually putting new brands on the market or reinforcing the position of existing brands. A relaunch or introduction often involves a new logo. That logo must become embedded in the minds of potential consumers at the lowest possible cost and in the shortest possible time. But what is a good logo? What conditions might we specify for its design? The Bacardi bat and the Nike swoosh are completely different. Are they both examples of strong shapes or could other, stronger logos have been developed on a lower budget? This article surveys the critical success factors.

The logo is an important part of brand presentation. It must be recognised when standing alone, and also evoke the right associations in the consumer's mind. This makes the choice of logo design a key prerequisite for success. Creating a logo involves two key aspects: shape and colour. An earlier study on the effect of colour on object recognition [1] demonstrated that colour is less important than shape. Although colour helps logo recognition, correct identification does not depend on it. Logos reproduced in a different colour or in black and white are as easy to identify as logos in the correct colour combination. This implies that the key to a logo's impact is its shape: a strong brand has a strong shape. But what makes a shape strong or weak? How can we define this? These are the questions that prompted this investigation into what constitutes a strong logo shape.

Types of logo

This study focuses on logo symbols rather than text, since the latter is generally too close to the brand name. The following definition has been adopted: a logo is a brand's visually symbolic identifying mark [2].

This visually symbolic identifying mark can be designed in various ways. This study is based on the division of logo shapes into three groups in line with Holmqvist's classification [3]. We refer to the logos in this division as descriptive, suggestive and abstract (see [Figure 1](#)).

Descriptive

These are shapes that are immediately recognisable; they are familiar in our culture from their visual representation. Logos in this group include common geometrical shapes (squares, circles, and so on) or are easy to name. Puma's logo is an example.

Suggestive

The second category consists of shapes whose symbolism is harder to identify. A descriptive shape is represented in a somewhat abstract way that makes it harder to pinpoint. Suggestive logos include the Fjllrven fox.

Abstract

These logos have no generally accepted, familiar meaning. Specific, undefinable shapes are used in an unfamiliar combination. This makes it impossible to instantly name the symbol. The Nike swoosh is an example.

The question, is: which category of logo is most easily and accurately recognised and will build a strong brand image?

The study

A preliminary study and two experiments were carried out to identify which category of logo will create a strong brand image. The logos used were taken from Rick Eiber's book *World Trademarks: 100 Years*, a collection of logos grouped thematically [4]. To ensure that none of the logos had the advantage of familiarity, those chosen for the research were not currently in use in the Netherlands.

In the preliminary study, about a hundred Communication Studies students from the University of Amsterdam validated the logos by dividing them into the three groups previously described. The respondents were also asked to select a top three for each group, namely those most representative of their type. This resulted in a validated selection of nine logos that could be regarded as representative of the three types (Figure 2).

Verify Nederland, which specialises in perception research, was asked to help conduct the experiments. Its techniques included eye-tracking and tachitoscopic tests.

In order to accurately assess the effects of the three logo categories, the study needed to closely emulate real-life settings. For example, respondents need to view a logo as they might in a magazine or a bus shelter. Time is also a factor: for example, the effect of a very brief exposure to the logo versus a longer, more leisurely exposure. How well is a logo remembered following brief exposure compared to longer exposure? And which is remembered best a few days later? With this in mind, the final test was made up of two experiments, as outlined in the boxed text.

Results

The results of the first experiment, in which the test subjects could take their time, show that abstract and descriptive logos are recognised more easily and speedily than suggestive logos. It was found that suggestive logos had a significantly lower identification score 60.7% as opposed to 70.6% for abstract and 71.2% for descriptive logos coupled with significantly longer response time (i.e. they took longer to identify). In subsequent testing, the abstract category emerged as far and away the best. Abstract logos were correctly identified by 74.8% of the respondents. This is significantly higher than the 56.1% and 59.0% correct identification rate for suggestive and descriptive logos respectively.

The second experiment underscores the results of the first experiment. Here too the abstract logos were recognised significantly more easily and speedily than the suggestive and descriptive logos (see Table 1). However, the gap between descriptive and suggestive logos was slightly smaller.

To summarise, abstract logos scored the highest in this study, while suggestive logos clearly lagged. The reason for this outcome may lie in the degree of specificity. Suggestive logos have too few reference points to be named immediately and

therefore recognised. In addition, they are often less distinctive, which makes it harder for them to become fixed in the consumer's mind. According to modern theory, logos are perceived as a whole: greater complexity makes perceiving, and hence remembering them more difficult.

It is notable that the abstract logos scored markedly higher on correct identification following very brief exposure. One reason why abstract logos perform well in general and especially when exposed for only a brief time is their low level of complexity and high degree of uniqueness. Low complexity makes an image (which is perceived as a whole) easy to take in and recognise again. Moreover, abstract shapes are often unique and so specific that they are not easily confused with other shapes. This increases the chances of correct identification.

Caress

The above study was concerned only with logo recognition. It deliberately omitted the link between brand or product and logo. This allowed insight into the performance of particular logos purely in terms of recognition. In practice, however, there is always a certain link between brand and logo. The interesting question for this study is how far the laboratory situation translates to the real world of brand communication.

With this in mind a third test was conducted. This test was based on a scenario in which a new brand of skincare product was to be marketed under the name Caress. Three advertisements for Caress were designed, which differed only in the type of logo used (see [figure 3](#)). All three logos had been validated in the first study and all had a nature theme. The advertisement was included as the back page of Libelle a popular women's magazine in a standard eye-tracking test. In all cases the advertisement, the logo and the brand name were easily perceived (minimum 95% with an average $n = 111$). The aim of the advertisement, namely to publicise the new brand and its logo, was therefore achieved successfully.

The advertisement was then presented in a pixelated form that is, information in the image was disguised by creating a highly distorted picture

An image presented in this way can only be reconstructed in the respondent's mind if he or she recognises the image from a previous observation. Based on the earlier study, the abstract logo was expected to be the most easily recognised and indeed this was confirmed. The differences were less marked than in the first study, but from both product and brand recognition point of view the ad with the abstract logo achieved the best results (see [Table 2](#)).

Conclusion

The results of the study show that there is a connection between the shape of a logo and how easily it is recognised by consumers. From this, critical success factors for logos can be defined.

1. Abstract logos are most easily recognised The reason for the superior recognition qualities of logos using specific, undefinable shapes in an unfamiliar combination lies in their specificity and lower complexity. This simplifies reconstruction of the logo in the consumer's mind and therefore increases recognisability.
2. Abstract logos are recognised faster A distinctive, more specific shape is relatively easy to construct in the consumer's mind. This increases the speed with which consumers recognise the brand or logo. Abstract logos will therefore also be more easily identified when moving past them (for example, on bus shelters or billboards).

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3. Abstract logos require fewer fixations to achieve recognition. The average number of fixations on the brand/logo combination was lower for abstract than for descriptive and suggestive logos. So even though the abstract logo is viewed for a shorter time, it still achieves the highest degree of recognition. This implies that fewer exposures to the brand image are required to achieve good recognition. This translates to savings on the communication budget a feature bound to appeal to any marketing professional.
 4. Suggestive logos confuse consumers. Suggestive logos were least effective in achieving recognition. This may be because they are 'neither fish nor fowl'. They provide consumers with insufficient reference points to immediately name and identify them. In addition, they often display more complexity than abstract logos, which makes it harder to store the overall impression. Reconstructing a relatively complex, unnameable image is too difficult. The results of this study provide useful guidance when deciding what direction the development of a logo should take.

An abstract logo takes less time than others to embed in the consumer's mind and causes least confusion. Descriptive logos come a good second. Shapes that can be identified and named immediately are easy to reconstruct in the consumer's mind and gain high recognition. The disadvantage of these shapes compared to abstract logos is that they are not unique, so it becomes more difficult to create an intimate association with a particular brand.

Suggestive logos appear the least desirable choice for building a strong new brand. Their lack of uniqueness and the difficulty in naming them immediately makes it hard to embed them in the consumer's mind. Achieving a good level of recognition of a new suggestive logo will require a larger communication budget.

It is no coincidence that Nike's swoosh an abstract logo has become a successful icon. This study shows that it exploits the capacity of the consumer's mind to take in and recognise this kind of logo speedily, efficiently and effectively.

The research: what affects memory of logos?

Experiment 1

In the first experiment 326 respondents were told that research was being done on a number of new logos for products that were soon to be launched. The nine logos selected in the preliminary study were first shown to respondents one by one. During this preexposure, respondents decided for themselves how long they looked at each logo. About half an hour after this pre-exposure respondents were shown six logos on a touch screen. One had been shown earlier; the others were unfamiliar, but were on the same theme as the 'target' logo. An abstract flower logo, for example, was displayed in a field of other flower logos: a mixture of descriptive, suggestive and abstract. The respondents' task was to touch the logo they had seen earlier. The experiment measured accuracy of recognition and how long respondents took to touch a logo.

A total of 139 respondents agreed to take part in a follow-up test to measure logo recognition over time. Two days after the initial test, a written test was sent to their home address. The test consisted of the same nine fields of logos that Verify had originally shown them. Respondents were asked to tick the nine logos they had seen earlier during the pre-exposure. The order in which the logos within a field were presented was changed to ensure that recognition was based on the logo itself and not on remembering its position in the field. The aim was to determine whether there is any difference in how well abstract, suggestive and descriptive logos are recognised, both shortly after pre-exposure and a few days later.

Experiment 2

The second experiment consisted of a 'tacho test' conducted by Verify. Some 215 respondents took part in this. Again, they were told they were helping with research into new logos for products that were soon to be launched. In terms of design, this experiment was similar to the first, the main difference being that the logos were presented to respondents for only 24 milliseconds. There was therefore no extended pre-exposure period. A logo's impact was measured by presenting it tachistoscopically (for a fraction of a second) and then displaying it on a touch screen in a field of six logos and asking respondents to touch the logo they had just been shown. The experiment measured accuracy of identification and the time respondents took to make their choice. The aim was to determine whether there is any difference in how well abstract, suggestive and descriptive logos are recognised when presented very briefly. This is comparable to the conditions under which images communicated on billboards are seen.

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Faculty of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam. Our thanks go to Bregje Jansen, who carried out the study as part of her master's thesis under the supervision of a mentor team consisting of A. Bijl and Dr M. Yzer.

For further information on the study, contact Claessens Product Consultants, g.vandelaar@claessenspc.nl or www.claessensproductconsultants.nl.

[1] *Claessens Product Consultants: The influence of colour on object recognition*. 1997.

[2] *D Coolsma and A van Dommelen: Vormgeving in communicatie. Alphen aan den Rijn/Zaventem, Samson Bedrijfsinformatie*, 1996.

[3] *L Holmqvist: Degeneration of trademarks*. Sweden, Beson-Tryck AB, 1971.

[4] *R Eiber: World trademarks: 100 years*. New York: Graphis US, 1996.

NOTES & EXHIBITS

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FIGURE 1: HOLMQVIST'S THREE STYLES OF LOGO



FIGURE 2: THE NINE MOST REPRESENTATIVE LOGOS

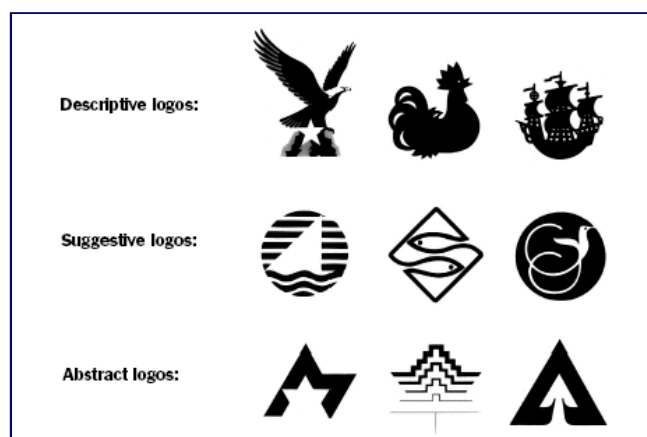


TABLE 1: OVERALL STUDY RESULTS: % CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED

	Experiment 1	Subsequent measurement	Experiment 2
Abstract	70.6	74.8	81.9
Suggestive	60.7	56.1	66.0
Descriptive	71.2	59.0	72.6

FIGURE 3: CARESS: THREE ADS WERE SET UP, DIFFERING ONLY IN LOGO



TABLE 2: PRODUCT/BRAND IDENTIFICATION: % CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED

	Descriptive	Suggestive	Abstract
Product Identification	44	38	49
Brand Identification	23	17	28

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