

Your logo here: How a logo becomes an icon

MAE ANDERSON - Associated Press - Associated Press

In almost every corner of the world, golden arches symbolize something. So does a red bulls-eye. The same is true for a half-eaten apple. Ditto for the well-known swoosh.

The most iconic company logos such as those of McDonald's, Target, Apple and Nike are visual cues that are seared onto people's consciousness without their even realizing it.

That kind of influence has always been valuable, but now it's priceless. Companies are fighting for the shrinking attention spans and wallets of consumers who increasingly get their information on tiny cellphone screens. And as companies expand into emerging markets, images matter more than words. The brand identity that a logo brings can pay off, and companies know it.

That's why Ford's executive chairman Bill Ford described the day that the automaker got back its signature blue oval as "one of the best days I can remember." The company gained back the logo along with other assets in May after having used them as collateral for a \$23.5 billion loan six years earlier.

"Logos are a symbol of who you are, a rallying point, an identification of the company that lets you stand out from others," said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys Inc., a New York customer research firm that measures company image.

What's better, people like logos. LogosQuiz, a smartphone application that tests people's knowledge of company logos, is one of the top free games on Apple's iPad tablet and iPhone. And a short animated French film made up of nothing but logos called "Logorama" won an Oscar in 2010.

That kind of hype translates into dollars for companies. Interbrand, which tracks brand values, of which the logo is a key part, values Coca-Cola's brand at \$71.86 billion; McDonald's at \$35.59 billion, Nike's at \$14.53 billion and Ford's brand at \$7.5 billion.

Here is a look at how companies create and maintain iconic logos.

TARGET: HITTING THE BULLSEYE

Target Corp.'s bullseye was born when department store operator The Dayton Co. decided to open a discount chain in Minneapolis in 1962.

Stewart K. Widdess, Dayton's publicity director, was given the task of naming the company so shoppers wouldn't confuse it with the department-store chain. After considering 200 other names, Widdess came up with both the name "Target" and

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the now ubiquitous red-and-white bullseye.

"As a marksman's goal is to hit the center bulls-eye, the new store would do much the same in terms of retail goods, services, commitment to the community, price, value and overall experience," Widdess has been quoted as saying.

The company at first considered using a bullseye with a few bullet holes in it. That, however, didn't seem appropriate for a family store.

The first logo had the name "Target" written in black over a red and white bullseye with three red circles and two white circles. The store's first print ad campaigns used the Target as their theme with the tagline: "Aim straight for Target discount stores."

The bullseye was simplified in 1968 with a red center, one white circle and one red circle, without the name on top of it. Experts say that logo stuck because it embodies the two hallowed traits of a good icon: it's simple yet distinctive.

"It's incredibly eye catching in general and it's a simple, clean design," said Allen Adamson managing director of branding firm Landor Associates. "It's one of the strongest brandmarks in the marketplace."

Of course, Target had something else on its side, too: time. It's more difficult to come up with a memorable logo today than 50 years ago because many iconic symbols — such as the bullseye — already are trademarked.

MCDONALD'S: INSPIRED BY ARCHITECTURE

Would McDonald's Corp. be the world's biggest fast-food chain if it kept its original symbols - the McDonald family crest or "Speedee" the chef - instead of the Golden Arches?

McDonald's was started in 1948 in San Bernardino, Calif., by brothers Dick and Mac McDonald. But by the early 1950s, the Oakbrook, Ill.-based company began to franchise and grow rapidly when businessman Ray Kroc bought the company.

In 1953, architect Stanley Meston designed the first franchised building, in Phoenix, Ariz., with red and white tiles and a sloped roof. Dick McDonald thought the design was a bit boring, so he sketched in the now-famous yellow arches, dubbing them the "Golden Arches," according to Mike Bullington, McDonald's archivist.

But Meston didn't like them. So McDonald's hired sign maker George Dexter to create them. He added in yellow neon and the arches soon became emblematic of McDonald's restaurants.

Still, they weren't yet part of the logo. Originally, McDonald's used the McDonald family crest, a shield with a dragon, fish and boat icon on it, as the logo. When it began to open franchise restaurants, road signs incorporated a single arch along with a chef character called "Speedee," which was intended to represent

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McDonald's "Speedee Service System."

It wasn't until 1968 that the double arches became the company's official logo. It was designed by Paul Schrage, then McDonald's chief marketing officer, and D'Arcy, their advertising agency.

Ironically, that was about the same time actual arches were disappearing from stores, as the company expanded and remodeled old stores. Most arches were gone from McDonald's locations by the end of the 1960s, but the Golden Arches of the logo remained. In fact, they've become such an icon that they've hardly been altered since 1968, and are easily recognized globally.

"As a symbol, it's simple and sticky," says Adamson, the branding expert. "Show the logo to kids without the word and they'll know it's a hamburger and French fries."

GAP: LOST IN TRANSLATION

Not every logo is a hit, of course, especially when a company tinkers with a beloved one. In 2010, without any announcement or warning, Gap Inc. changed its white type-on-navy "blue square" logo, which it had introduced more than a decade earlier. The new logo had a lowercase "gap" with a blue box in the right hand corner.

Officials revamped the logo at a time when the retailer, which had brought khakis to the masses in the 1990s, had lost its fashion edge. Sales were slipping.

Gap officials were hoping the new logo would communicate to customers that it was updating its image with more modern designs of jeans, pants and other clothing. But that message was lost on customers.

After the new logo was out, Gap fans voiced their discontent with it on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. A fake Twitter feed, (at)GapLogo, even was created to lampoon the move (it currently has more than 3,600 followers).

"Our Creative Director just quit, the ACD is in a corner drinking and muttering to himself and Jenna the intern is softly crying. JUST GREAT," the feed tweeted humorously the day after the flap.

About a week later, the retailer decided to reinstate its old logo.

The lesson? It's tempting for a company with a well-known logo to want to tinker with the image to boost a sagging reputation. But that's often a mistake since logos become more recognizable, and thus more valuable, the longer they've been around. And of course, a logo change can't solve all of a company's problems.

"We remind clients that a logo is not going to change people's minds, but it can stay in the mind and burn into memory," said Sagi Haviv, a partner at Chermayeff & Geismar, a firm that designed the Chase bank logo, among others.

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AETNA: CHANGE CAN BE GOOD

Sometimes, though, a revamped logo is just what a company needs.

A new logo can be critical when a company is trying to get the word out about a new message. For instance, when the industry has gone through substantial changes or there are different company services being offered.

"If the character of the mark no longer jibes with the positioning of the company or product then it makes sense to change," says Haviv, from Chermayeff & Geismar.

Aetna, the big insurer, revamped its logo in January to address changes in the health care industry. Health care legislation that is likely to be phased in over the next several years includes a system in which consumers can buy insurance through new online marketplaces.

For insurers like Aetna, that means they will have to more actively market their products to consumers — not just businesses. In order to do that, Aetna decided it would need a more consumer-friendly logo.

"We are much more focused on consumers and consumers have a much greater voice," said Belinda Lang, vice president of Brand, Digital and Consumer Marketing, for Aetna. "The logo needed to be effective in a digital, mobile and social environment."

Aetna worked with branding firm Siegel + Gale to revamp its logo: a blue wordmark or logo that is only text, with a stick figure of a person. The result? The new logo is a purple wordmark with a lower case font and linked letters. The stick figure is gone.

The company says the response to the logo has been positive. Lang says the logo has gotten good reviews in the design community and employees, an important group to win over, have said they like the new logo.

"I continually get emails about how much they love pulling out their new business cards," she says.

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