

# In search of brand magic



The visual identity of a brand is the vehicle to communicate something meaningful, expressing the brand idea and bringing life to it. And the most important role of the brand is to make us feel better, says **Barbra Wright** of Dragon Rouge

To begin, let's get the semantics out of the way – while for some, a brand's identity may mean its logo, in this narrative I'll be thinking about a brand's visual identity as everything a brand communicates through the medium of design. This does, of course, include, and is possibly anchored by, its logo but also extends through a palette of elements that will encompass type, colour, graphic elements, imagery and language. It is the curation of these elements against a given brief that gives rise to a distinct and differentiated identity which embodies the brand idea, bringing its character to life and allowing it to enter into dialogue with its audience. This dialogue makes a brand meaningful for its patron, communicating truths, meeting needs and desires and promising a shift in experience towards a better state of being.

Dr Irene Scopelliti, professor of organisational behaviour at City University in London, tells us that: "Research has found that aesthetically pleasing packaging stimulates some centres in the brain associated with intrinsic reward, so even just looking at brands that have beautiful design can make us feel better."

This is a good place to start. When asked, 'why are brands meaningful?' we could answer a multitude of responses, for brands are complex beings. But perhaps the most obvious role, although seldom expressed succinctly, is that brands make us feel better.

While this is a haughty claim and, for some, perhaps oversimplistic, it is, in fact, true. We put on a pair of Nike Free Hyperfeel trainers and feel cooler and more comfortable – better. We fill our tank with Shell V Power Nitro + Unleaded and rest assured we'll get to where we're going – better. We coat our teeth with Colgate Max White One™ and defy the yellow tinge – better. We swill the Mazola cholesterol-free corn oil in the pan, the potatoes don't stick and the heart keeps ticking – better. We pop the Moët cork – better. Brands were born to house product propositions and communicate something meaningful and life enhancing, making us feel better.

The visual identity of a brand is the vehicle that transmits this feeling shift. Curating a visual identity is a complex art. At its heart, the role of a brand identity is to strike a chord – to touch the right spot, to make a

person feel met, seen and understood. In the therapy room, this is called 'empathic attunement'. When two people meet in dialogue so that the communication harmonises around a shared truth, problem, goal or ideal, they are communing in attunement and experiencing the magic of empathy in which everything else falls away and they are able to rest in the moment of being truly seen. Great brands know the magic of empathy and understand that brand communication is primarily about empathetic relationships – persuasion comes second and will be an easy sell if the empathy hook is strong enough to begin with.

Sadly, in this chaotic, interesting world in which we live, these moments of truly being seen are few and far between. As we wander through this media-message-matrix that our world is fast becoming, we look for, and are arrested by, the messages that truly 'see us'. Those messages are invested with meaning that make us feel understood. Effectively, they validate our very being. And so we feel better. It is precisely because we are now bombarded by thousands of messages a minute that it becomes simultaneously important and challenging to strike the right chord.

Let's turn this around for a second. What is happening when a brand meets and validates us? An adage that Jung has enlightened us with explains this nicely: perception is projection.

Living beings, especially the human kind, are hard-wired to go in search of the magical other. Originally, the purpose of this was to make more humans – cut to the hyper-real Garden of Eden, a magical world full of symbolic serpent blood and apple seeds. But we were very needy and, indeed, quite clever so we quickly discovered or created a whole lot of other things that could represent the magical other, endlessly trying to complete ourselves with missing pieces of our misshapen jigsaw lives.

We look for things to make our picture look whole and we attach to things that will fill the gaps in our lives. The visual identities that we are drawn to are symbolic representations of the perceived 'thing' that will fill the gap – perception is projection. A strong brand identity will trigger the desire to fill the gap by conveying the promise of closing the gap.

Consumerism and the proliferation of brand communication that goes with it are lofty extensions borne out of the Garden of Eden concept. We have created a world full of desire, laden with symbols of the magical other and thick with the promise of completion and (pro)creation.

'The medium is the message', was first coined by Marshall McLuhan to explain that the medium used becomes synonymous with the message it is communicating, so creating a symbiotic relationship through which

the medium influences how the message is perceived. The message is strengthened by the chosen medium.

The driving brand idea or message is encapsulated in a visual identity using the chosen medium to create a vessel for transmitting the message. The curation of a potent brand identity is a challenging art for a few simple strokes that need to tell a big story. Thoughts ladder together to tell a story through a visual identity; this can be unpicked by asking four simple questions:

**What's the idea?** We look for the driving force behind a brand. Its purpose and reasons for being, believing in and buying.

**What's the media?** Creative teams are briefed to find the best way to communicate the idea so that it is impactful, meaningful and cuts through the chaos to meet the consumer/customer and in so doing complete the unfilled gap in their jigsaw. It's probably worth caveating that sometimes the gap is not really there at all but we want something so badly we believe it to be: the red-soled Louboutin; the leather-upholstered Jaguar; the Audi door clicking shut; the Mulberry buckle strap.

**What's the story that emerges?** When idea and media come together they transmit a story layered with meaning to motivate choice. Some stories are very succinct.

Nowadays more brands are also addressing this oft-uttered millennial probe:

**What's the moral?** Our search for meaning is growing ever deeper. We want to be touched by pivotal truths and understood on more meaningful levels. New media has enabled us to bellow our own stories publicly and we want to feel heard, understood and mirrored by the purchases we make, by the way brands respond to our outpouring. We want to feel like we are making a difference and creating good sway.

Meaning is invaluable/meaning is value. Why does meaning matter? Because without meaning, nothing matters. Meaning drives the purpose of everything we do. Without that meaning, without purpose, why does it matter what we do?

We choose objects that both represent and complete ourselves. Heinz Kohut's psychoanalytic theory calls these 'self-objects' – external objects that function as part of the self-machinery and become indistinct from the self. We do not experience them as separate to who we are; rather they define

*Jaguar: customers can want something so badly, they believe it will complete the unfilled gap in their jigsaw, be it a certain pair of shoes, handbag or the leather-upholstered Jaguar*



who we are. They are objects that complete the self and are necessary for normal functioning.

In childhood, these are sometimes referred to as transitional objects (Winnicott theory) – mother substitutes that provide a transition to independence, allowing us to move between states without distress. In adulthood, we still use transitional objects but they are not seen as imperative for self-regulation. Kohut posits that the self-object function (i.e. what the self-object does for the self) is taken for granted and seems to take place in a blind zone, out of conscious awareness. The function usually does not become truly visible until the relation with the self-object is somehow broken. This is why when brands we love change beyond meaning, it causes uproar: cue Tropicana and Gap's failed redesigns and their return to their original self to rescue their brand equity and advocacy. When a relationship is established with a self-object, the relationship connection can lock in place quite powerfully, and the pull of the connection may affect both self and self-object, informing the way communication shapes between the two and the principles that guide that communication.

Brand identities can be classified as self-



*Nike: its Free Hyperfeel trainers make wearers feel better by making them cooler and more comfortable*

reported they take their teddy bear with them when going away on business. Many said the bear reminds them of home and a cuddle helps them to nod off. Fifty-one per cent of British adults said they still have a teddy bear from their childhood and the average teddy in Britain is 27 years old (source: upi.com).

In the interesting times we live in, branded objects provide us with a small

When designing brands across this complex mix, there are only two thoughts that really matter. The first is: know exactly which elements to keep consistent to create a thread of truth that will hold the brand identity together through every piece of communication it ever does, anywhere. The second is: be clear about which elements have permission to change, and how they are allowed to change to accommodate the requirements of different media, channels and formats.

This is the foundation of guidelines. Some people think this is a dirty word, so let's call it principles. A brand that is principled acts in accordance with a code of ethics or values and shows recognition of right and wrong. It knows what it stands for and communicates this purposefully. It lives within a system based on a given set of rules. It also has a clear sense of its anchor points – the visual elements that can never change – as well as its character elaborators – the visual elements that flex to tell a story in a relevant and motivating way across different media.

Through the application of these principles, sticky visual equity is created so that prescribed arrangements of type, colour, language and image become synonymous with a brand and convey meaning almost mesmerically.

## “Brand identities can be classified as self-objects – they enable completion, regulation and self-actualisation”

objects – they enable completion, regulation and self-actualisation, transporting us safely between states, enabling us to augment our experience, status and individual identity. Most of us go through life with special attachments to comforting objects and brands. Think about that first LP, a special pair of jeans, a piece of grandma's jewellery, old photo albums – and even teddy bears. The hotel chain Travelodge surveyed 6,000 Britons to learn more about Britain's fascination with the teddy bear after its staff tried to reunite more than 75,000 forgotten bears left behind in its 452 hotels in England and found many were not owned by children. Twenty-five per cent of male respondents

sense of comfort and security to deal with changing circumstances and the stresses of modern life. We imbue them with emotional meaning. Contrary to the popular view of these objects signifying some weakness, psychologists have demonstrated that people using transitional objects tend to be more confident and secure in the rest of their lives.

In today's digital eco-system, the way we encounter a brand's identity is ever-changing and it is often required to live across a mix of media, channels and formats. Nowadays, brand identities need to work and convey meaning on app icons smaller than postage stamps, work in moving media and extend to fill 48-sheet billboards.

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