

SUCCESSFUL LOGOS EXPLAINED: It's All About Credibility Principles

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Company managers, large and small, can now assess the power of their logo by using a relatively new basis for judgment: If the company logo is credibility-based it will have power to influence company messages in the minds of company stakeholders. We know how effective credible people are, but now credibility principles apply to company logos. When a company *speaks*, it must be considered a credible source.

Why should company managers care?

If the company logo is on a business card or letterhead, company managers have logo identification good, bad or indifferent. Successful logos have the power to help achieve company goals. Bad or indifferent logos may actually undermine company efforts. Research has demonstrated that successful logos are credibility-based.

Why is being credibility-based key to successful logos?

This requirement stems from the teachings of late graphic design legend, Saul Bass, who is famous for his successful logos for AT&T, United Airlines, United Way, Rockwell International, Alcoa and Continental Airlines (during the period 1968 to 1989). If logos symbolize the company business, characterize particular company attributes and are contemporary they will have *power*, he would say.

Why are the teachings of Saul Bass important?

It all goes back to Communication 101. There are three elements in the communication process:

- 1) The source or sender of the message (the company),
- 2) The message, and
- 3) The receiver (stakeholder).

Many studies in interpersonal communication (people to people) conclude that if the source is competent, reliable, and forward thinking the message will be more readily accepted by the receiver. *Competent, reliable* and *forward thinking* make up the components of being *credible* in interpersonal communication.

For example, a computer whiz would be more influential on what mouse or software program to buy than, say, a chef. A chef, on the other hand, would be more influential when it comes to the best curry to buy and where, or the latest cookbook. You wouldn't go to the computer whiz for food suggestions, and you wouldn't go to the chef for electronic suggestions. Well, in most cases.

In short, a person high in the dimensions of *competent*, *reliable* and *forward thinking* will be more credible, and, therefore, more influential. Again, these are the three prongs of being *credible*. Likewise, a company high in dimensions of *expert*, *trustworthy* and *forward-thinking* will be *credible* and, therefore, more influential. (Note the similarity of words.) This is because people relate to companies the same way they relate to people. These are *brand-customer* relationships. We attribute the same attributes to companies as we do to people such as being expert on the subject as well as efficient, friendly, forward thinking and maybe a bit techie. Companies and people both have names. They both have families. Past relationships with both determines how we intend to deal with the person or the company in the future.

What is the role of the company logo in an integrated marketing communication system?

It is part of, but a very high profile part of, the total company marketing communication system, which makes up the company brand. As such, the role of the company logo is to project its unique credibility attributes. The creative objective is to develop the company logo as a symbol with the company name, which portrays this unique credibility.

How does a designer create a credibility-based logo?

The first thing a designer does is symbolize the company business. This says the company is an *expert* in that business. Like the shoe repair shop with a sign hanging on the store front with a "boot" or "shoe" symbol together with the text: "Joe's Shoe Repair." The designer then makes the "boot" or "shoe" "contemporary" or *forward-thinking* and Joe is almost there. Make it look *trustworthy* with traits that define the descriptive nature of the shoe repair shop such as "experienced," "professional" and "friendly" and Joe has a credible logo, a power logo.

Joe's company name, "Joe's Shoe Repair" is also credibility-based. "Shoe Repair" says Joe is an *expert* in that field. Joe lends his name "Joe" indicating that he will stand by his work, thereby being *trustworthy*. And, Joe is short for Joseph which is more streamlined, more *forward-thinking* (maybe a stretch, but you get what I mean).

Saul Bass was right in his basic logo planning approach. He would say, "Each program begins with the formulation of a set of objectives and a verbal description of what the client logo should say. These are the design attributes we want to portray in the new logo. We study the company, visit its offices, interview and meet with its people and come to a very clear definition of what attributes are to be symbolized before any designing is done. Intent has to be articulated before you begin, or you just get sucked into a process where

everything you do is self-justifying. Logo planning is ninety percent of the design effort.”

Bass’s AT&T logo program is a good example. AT&T executives at the end of the sixties were concerned about the public’s perception of their company. Although the Bell System was generally regarded as the finest telephone system on Earth, the public still thought of the company as a monolithic, uncaring, slightly dowdy “Ma Bell.” In short, the image did not reflect the goals and realities of AT&T as a cutting edge technology company. Ma Bell needed a new look.

Bass united the company with one logo symbolizing *worldwide communications* -- its basic business. This was a change that also said that AT&T was credible in the areas of *technology, efficiency* and *forward-thinking*. Bass added that the design “broke through the visual environment instead of adding to the clutter.” As a result, AT&T enjoys a 93 percent recognition rating. That’s more Americans than know the name of the president of the United States. AT&T is a great credibility-based logo which serves the company well.

Paul Rand designed the original IBM logo, which has been updated with a more forward-looking feel over the years. IBM has always been an image/brand powerhouse and is considered one of the early classics. This strength played a large role in the computer maker’s successful reinvention in the 1990s under new chief Louis V. Gerstner Jr. One of his first moves was to shore up its branding by unifying and bringing consistency to logo identification and marketing communications in general across all its products, services in all geographic markets.

Smart use of branding has allowed IBM to hold its own when other technology companies lost ground. IBM has retained its position as an industry leader in smart image marketing. It was ranked number three behind Coca-Cola and Microsoft as one of the world’s 10 most valuable brands. AT&T, by the way was number 10. (*Business Week*, August 6, 2001.)

All companies --- large or small --- can achieve IBM’s and AT&T’s success. Compare your present logo with the three elements, which make up a credibility-based logo. Does it symbolize your company business, which says you are an expert in this business? Does it have the appropriate “trustworthy” attributes? Is it “contemporary” symbolizing a “forward-thinking” look? Is your company name credibility-based? Is your logo applied with rigorous consistency in a clear manner?

As many company managers are learning, a credible logo as the heart of a credible marketing communications system creates a successful company brand. The payoff is in loyal customers, high caliber employees, dedicated suppliers, understanding governmental bodies and great financial relations.

Successful logos are not an abstract concept any longer. They are credibility-based. This is their role in the greater role of a total credibility-based integrated marketing communication system, which makes a great company brand.

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