

Brand = Image

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In 1971 Carolyn Davidson was a young graphic design student at Portland State University. She was happy enough to earn some extra money when a member of faculty asked her to do some design work for his company, Blue Ribbon Sports, and agreed a fee of \$2 an hour. He wanted a stripe for a new running shoe, asking for 'something that suggests speed'. When, after many hours of work, she presented him and his colleagues with a logo, they were unimpressed and asked 'What else you got?' But after a few minutes her client, realising he needed something urgently for a presentation to the Japanese, grudgingly accepted it. 'I don't love it', he said, 'but maybe it will grow on me.' He paid Carolyn's bill of \$35.

In case you haven't twigged yet, the client was Phil Knight, the product he needed a logo for was a new model of sports shoe which he called the 'Nike' after the Greek goddess of victory, and the logo was the original but already very recognisable version of what we now know as the Swoosh. (Ten years later, as the company was growing, Knight presented Davidson with a Swoosh shaped ring and \$150 worth of Nike stock - today worth \$650,000 or so.)

Who can say how the history of Nike might have been different but for that chance encounter? We could assume that Knight's energy and flair would have built a successful business anyway. But at best, it would have been different from the brand we know now, and just possibly, in the unpredictable world of fashion and style, it would just have never taken off as it did. Around the Swoosh, many other elements of Nike success would later

accrue – ‘Just Do It’, the adventurous designs, the celebrity endorsements, the bold and irreverent advertising. But it’s conceivable that, without that original element to set the tone, none of that would have happened.

Most theory about brand building assumes that the correct procedure is to start with a definition of the ‘brand essence’ – maybe at the heart of a ‘brand key’ or ‘brand onion’ - and that the creative task is then to communicate this through images or behaviour. But history shows us that the actual sequence of events is often the other way round – many brands start with a visual image, and the meaning – or meanings - of the image are created by the brand’s various stakeholders. In fact, I want to suggest that this sequence is probably much more common, and may be a more helpful one for us to have in mind, than the received wisdom about brand essence coming first.

Because Nike is one of the great brand success stories, I’ve heard many people over the years attempt to use it as an example of a brand with ‘strong values’ or a ‘strong essence’. I’ve heard it claimed that Nike is all about ‘winning’ or about ‘endurance’ or some other, more or less banal, verbal construct. I’ve also heard, from people who’ve worked with or for Nike, that the organisation has *never* had a written statement of its ‘values’ or ‘essence’. Whether that’s literally true or not, I’m much more inclined to believe that Nike’s success emerged not from abstract thinking, but from a combination of the passion and energy of its people and the imaginative power of what it actually *did* visually – the designs, the advertising, and not least that original image.

Like a lot of powerful images that have helped build brands, there’s a definite element of happenstance about the Swoosh. Both the Dulux dog and the Andrex puppy (UK brand icons) were reportedly last minute additions to one off TV Commercials – the Old English

Sheepdog as a decorative prop for an otherwise unmemorable Dulux ad, the puppy as an inspired substitute when copy clearance unexpectedly refused to allow the little boy in the original script to unroll the toilet paper down the garden. And I have read (though I can't now find the reference) that the American Express 'Centurion's Head' came from a random trawl through a box of printer's blocks. As for Steve Jobs driving past the apple orchard... we'll come to that later.

So maybe the powerful visual symbols of successful brands are not always chosen as neat expressions of a previously selected abstract idea; they are, rather, selected by a combination of intuition and chance, and the power of the image itself, a power which cannot ultimately be reduced to words, then plays an important part in developing the meaning that the brand has for all its stakeholders. If it's hard to imagine Nike without the Swoosh, how might the history of Venice have been different without its winged lion? Venice today is a beautiful crumbling backwater, but for over a thousand years it was the centre of one of the world's most powerful trading empires, with dockyards that could build and fit out a warship in a day. The winged lion, which appears not just all over Venice but throughout the eastern Mediterranean, symbolises its dominance in a particular and unique way – it's not just a lion, with its connotations of strength and right to rule, but a lion with wings, a lion that could cross the sea at a moment's notice to wreak vengeance if necessary. The winged lion, like all the best symbols, is an image with many meanings, suggesting for example both peaceful rule and warlike anger, both beauty and strength, yet the power of the image itself immediately transcends any words that we attempt to reduce it to. I think it likely that over the centuries, this symbol must have played an important role in creating

the shared identity of the Venetians themselves, and in enabling them to project their power over others.

It would be fun to think that such a powerful symbol must have been created by a Venetian committee of PR and branding experts, who sat down in the eighth century and drew up a brand onion around words like 'strength', 'fierceness', and 'empire'. Yet the circumstances that led to this image were quite fortuitous: the winged lion just happened to be the conventional symbol for St Mark the Evangelist, whom the Venetians adopted in the ninth century as their patron saint. After a while the saint's symbol began to appear on the city's war banners, and the rest is history.

It seems somehow appropriate that today the 'Lion of St Mark' is also one of the most prestigious creative awards in advertising. It might also be regarded as the ancestor of so many furry animals that have acted as brand symbols ever since: the PG Chimps and their successor 'Monkey', the Cresta and Hofmeister Bears, Tony the Tiger, the Honey Monster, the Dulux sheepdog, the Andrex puppy, and most recently those Meerkats. Like the lion of St Mark, none of these brand symbols was developed as an expression of an abstract set of brand values; they were all adopted because they were memorable, or entertaining, or for other reasons that are no longer relevant. When John Webster first presented the Cresta Bear, the client is reported to have asked in bewilderment – 'Why a polar bear?' To which John replied: 'Why not?' (Presumably the same lack of logic led to Coca Cola, years later, developing a highly successful commercial full of polar bears which have also become recognisable brand properties.)

To be clear, I'm not just asserting the rather obvious point that visual symbols play an important role in building brands, but that the visual symbol itself is often where the brand

begins, and where it starts to derive its uniqueness and its meaning from. I think this may be as true today, in the digital age, as it was in the middle ages. So, as a final example, it may not be coincidence that the most powerful (as indicated by premium price, margin, and market cap) and resilient brand in the field of digital technology remains Apple, which right from its inception was a powerfully visual brand. Compare the fortunes of Apple with those of Dell, which for a while dominated the PC category through its low cost advantage, but never built a *brand* that could have helped it survive changing conditions or support innovation. Apple, of course, has outlasted Dell – and even outperformed Microsoft – most obviously because of its success at innovation. But I contend that it is also the power of the Apple brand that made this possible, both through its influence on the internal culture of the organisation and in enabling swift take up of its best innovations at a high margin. While Michael Dell was content to name his company after himself, and paid no attention whatever to its visual presentation, Steve Jobs right back in 1976 decided to call his startup Apple, because he had just driven past an apple farm and thought the name was ‘fun, spirited, and not intimidating’. The original rainbow apple was designed that year by Rob Janoff, with a bite out of the side solely to indicate this was an apple not a cherry. It’s hard to imagine quite what a bold and imaginative gesture this was in the computing world of 1976 - and even more than the Nike Swoosh, I can’t help feeling that this initial, radical choice of image made everything else possible, or at least a lot more possible than it would have been at ‘Jobs-Wozniak Computing Inc’. It presaged the ‘1984’ launch of the Macintosh, and the subsequent growing emphasis on visual design in both devices and interfaces, down to crucial details like the white earphones on the iPod. And as with Nike, I strongly suspect that this visual symbol and all those that followed it transformed the relationships between brand and employees, and brand and customers. I do not know

whether Apple, any more than Nike, ever had their version of a brand onion: in my view, they never needed one, because that original image said it all, more richly, more eloquently, and more precisely than any words on a Powerpoint slide could ever do.

I'm arguing that visual images are not so much representations of (a single) meaning as they are generators of (multiple) meanings. But we could see these visual images as accumulators of meaning too. As time passes, multiple experiences of the brand become associated with the image, and as a result the image grows in power, rather than diminishing. You look at the Apple logo now, or the Nike Swoosh, and its meaning for you may include your new iPhone, the legend of Steve Jobs, your most enjoyable run, memories of ads and a million other things. Hence a monkey can evoke a powerful urge for a cup of tea, and the winged lion struck fear into people's hearts along the Dalmatian coast. That is why visual consistency over time is important. And unlike words, a visual symbol can absorb changes in meaning too, so that the Apple logo can now evoke entertainment as easily as it once evoked computing.

Images have been described as 'polyvalent' – they can carry a multitude of meanings. That is part of their strength – it is also, perhaps, why organisations often fear them and distrust them. Perhaps companies have become frightened by the power of the visual image, the fact that they cannot ultimately define it or put it into words or control it. But they may do better if they have the courage to ride that tiger – and not, as Exxon/Esso appears to have done, to reject it. Paradoxically, while the digital world is saturated with visual images, moving or static, from YouTube to Instagram, many digital brands seem quite unvisual – check out Amazon, eBay, Yahoo. It may be that while any of these is strong enough for other

reasons (as Dell used to be) this doesn't matter. But the case of Apple suggests that in the long term, this may not just be a missed opportunity, but a fatal weakness.