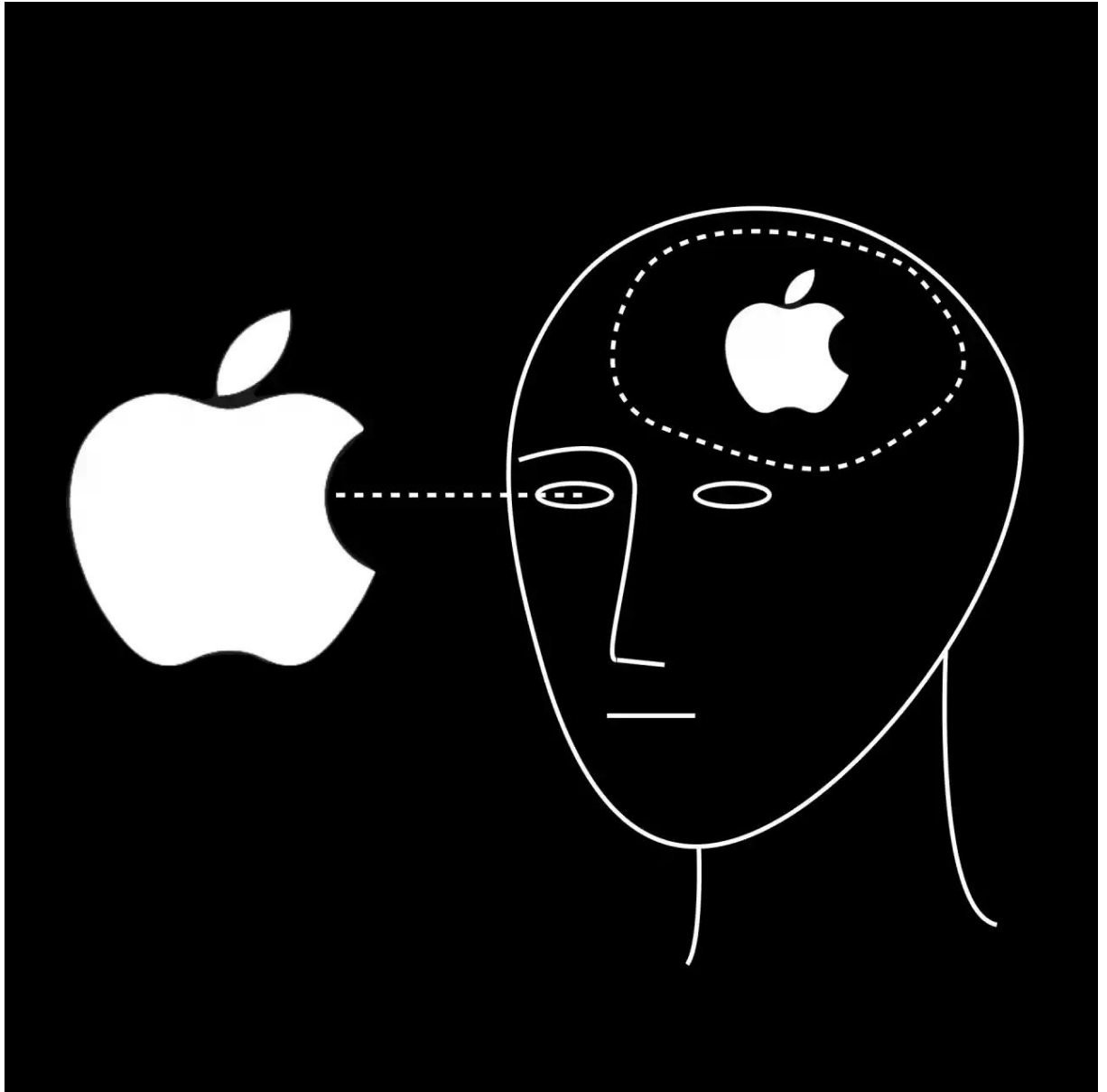


The Great Branding Myth: What Do Logos Actually Communicate?

By Luciano Cassisi



Can brands communicate their core ideas and values to the public through the design of their logos?

If you ask Google, YouTube, ChatGPT, or anyone else, "What should a logo or graphic mark convey?", you'll most likely get an answer more or less like this: to design a brand or a visual identification system, you must define a "brand concept" so it can be reflected every time the public sees the graphic mark, or the so-called "visual identity." This implies that the graphic mark (the logo), along with other elements of visual communication, must fulfill the

requirement of conveying a brand concept.

Regardless of the source, almost everyone seems to agree on the idea that a brand must be unique—unlike any other—and to achieve this, it must convey its values, purpose, vision, mission, positioning, personality, message, its "brand story" (*storytelling*)... In other words, it must convey some fundamental concept of the brand, although it's never quite clear which of the aforementioned concepts, or if it should convey all or just some of them.

This idea is so ingrained that there's a high probability that you, the reader of this article, also agree with it. If so, don't worry, because in a sense, it's true that a brand must convey its values, brand concept, story, or message. What is not so clear is how this is achieved. I invite you to continue reading to find out.

What Logos Really Communicate

Let's take some brands considered to be "good ones." For the above to be true, upon seeing them, we should be able to read their brand values, message, concept, etc., in them. In other words, if it is advisable for a brand mark to convey these things, then when observing good brands, we should be able to read those messages and concepts. Let's test this...

The image shows the Booking.com logo, which consists of the word "Booking" in a dark blue, sans-serif font, followed by ".com" in a lighter blue, sans-serif font.

Booking.com, a company dedicated to selling hotel accommodations, has this logotype which, as you can see, conveys no values, no concept, no story, and no message. The only message it conveys is the organization's name: Booking.com. You might tell me, "Well, you just happened to pick a logotype, without a symbol, without any imagery. How is it supposed to convey values with just a logotype?" The thing is, many brands have logotypes and no additional identifying marks, but let's see what happens with symbols.



This brand sells sportswear, sneakers, and all kinds of apparel, generally associated with sports. Certainly, when we see this symbol, we somehow evoke all of this. But... where are those ideas stored? Is the design of this symbol, its shape, really telling us about any of the things that come to mind when we see it?



Here we have another case. I've never flown with British Airways, but I've been told it's an airline famous for offering very good service. I can tell it's of British origin, but the name is indicating that, not the graphic design. That ribbon, accompanying the logotype, is not giving me information; it is not conveying any message. These marks are the elements with which British Airways writes its name.



The Zurich symbol conveys nothing more than a Z inside a blue circle. If the Z contains any concept, I consider myself incapable of decoding it, and I'm an expert on the subject.



Can you decode the HP brand concept by looking at this image? You might say, "Luciano, you just happened to pick two logotypes that either have no symbol or have symbols that express nothing." Let's try one that expresses a lot. A hyper-famous brand about which we know a great deal, and which is identified by a seashell.



What would be the Shell brand concept that this seashell symbol conveys to us? The reading of these concepts, which are given so much importance and generally end up determining the form of most brand marks, is not verified in reality! It's not even verified when we know the brand and have an idea of its brand concept.

Something that complicates matters further is the fact that the public enjoys finding hidden meanings in the marks of famous brands. For example, some fervently believe that the Nike symbol represents a wing of the eponymous Greek goddess. Others speculate that it is a synthesis of an athletic track seen in perspective. But none of this is verifiable. What is verifiable (because the designer who created it has stated so) is that it is an abstract mark whose shape attempts to convey—with relative success—the idea of speed, an idea that today has little relation to Nike's profile, its values, its concept, its mission, etc.; and yet, it remains perfectly functional for the identification needs of this brand. We can invent supposed "fundamental" messages for brand marks, but upon seeing them, what the public sees is just a signature.

The image shows the Sony logo, which consists of the word "SONY" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small registered trademark symbol (®) is located at the end of the word.

Four rather conventional letters form the word Sony. The only message they convey is: "this is the Sony logo"—its signature. Not much more to decode here. The design, the form of this mark, does not convey Sony's values, Sony's message, Sony's concept, or Sony's history... Faced with this evidence, I've been told: "The thing is, the mark communicates nothing out of context." Let's see, then, if it communicates fundamental concepts in other contexts.



Sony logotype in its contexts of use

From my perspective, the only direct message this mark conveys, when placed in its contexts of use, is its most elementary identifying message; that is, "this is said by" or "this was made by Sony." And the same happens with all brands, regardless of their type. Any additional message one might try to attach to an organization's or product's identifying marks evaporates instantly for the simple reason that when we see them in context, we perceive them as signatures, not as messages.

Of course, seeing a product with the Sony logo is not the same as seeing one from a second-rate brand. The logo does allow us to evoke everything we know about Sony, but those ideas are not made explicit in the design, in the form, and in the choice of motifs for the identifying mark. We can now draw a rather firm conclusion: identifying marks are not responsible for transmitting fundamental ideas about the organization, because these ideas, even if not expressed in the marks, are evoked when we see them. How does this happen?



Upon seeing this bitten apple, we think of nothing other than the renowned technology brand that manufactures computers, mobile devices, watches, etc., that has contributed very important innovations to society, and that is distinguished by its design... It is obvious that these characteristics are not being transmitted by the bitten apple motif. And yet, every time we see it, we think of all that. How is this effect produced?

Since Apple has existed, every time this brand says what it says or does what it does, it signs its messages and identifies its stores and products with the apple. Since everything this organization does more or less aligns with its mission, values, profile, characteristics, and concept... those ideas become lodged in our minds, associated with the name and the mark with which this organization identifies itself. This is how Apple has introduced its content into our brains, and it will continue to do so as long as it can. Today, every time we hear the word Apple, the content the company has worked to "put in our heads" comes to mind. The same thing happens every time we see the bitten apple symbol. For us to be able to evoke the brand's content, it must be stored in our minds, not in the brand mark.

Indeed, identification works the opposite of what most people think: the brand mark—and its audible synonym, the brand name—does not transmit content until that content already exists in the observer's mind. Therefore, what each individual evokes upon seeing a brand mark (logo) or hearing a brand name is never a closed or fixed concept over time. Each person forms their own idea about every brand they come into contact with.

What the Brand Should Actually Convey

The initial question has been answered, but a new one arises, likely a very concerning one for many professionals: if the brand mark doesn't need to convey fundamental concepts of the organization or product, then with what criteria should it be designed? With what criteria should its form be determined? The short answer is that one must apply criteria that guarantee its maximum performance; that is, criteria that ensure the logo offer all the necessary features to identify the brand in the best possible way, every time it manifests itself to the public. That is the only thing a good brand mark can offer, and it is no small feat.

The way to optimize a logo for its owner's identification needs, the way to make it "unique," has nothing to do with trying to convey clever concepts or convoluted ideas. Have you ever explained a profound concept only to have the client focus on whether they "like" the color? The problem isn't the explanation, but the lack of an objective design program to justify the

decisions. This program is the core of what we call [brand strategy](#). In our comprehensive guide, we break down precisely these performance parameters that replace "clever concepts" and allow you to defend any design with professional criteria.

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