

## The Art of the Mark

### How to Design Successful Logos, Symbols and Icons

So you have a new G4 loaded with RAM and you just got a trademark design job. "No problem," you think as you sit before this machine, able to merge or melt the most complicated of all the fonts loaded into your suitcase.

But to design a symbol or trademark, it is important to understand that without a knowledge of typography or drawing, your designs may have the shelf life of an overripe banana.

Listed here are some fundamental applications of drawing and type that should be considered in your compositions.

It is important to realize that the visual phenomenon known as "figure ground" or positive and negative forces interacting will always enhance and make your mark unique.

A successful mark is one that engages viewers and allows them to play a small interactive mind game with it. For example, the newly replaced Bank of America symbol incorporated a bird in the letterform, but the bird couldn't be seen by many of the bank's customers. After redrawing and several large television campaigns, BofA was able to delineate the bird (eagle?) in flight. Once the viewer managed to visually "resolve" the puzzle, the mark became a classic symbol of "once you see it, you can't see it any other way."

So where do you start? An analysis of the current logo always needs to be done. The first thing to look for is how much equity the current brand has. It is a smart designer who does not jump at the opportunity to redo a mark such as Coca-Cola. The reason for a redesign varies:

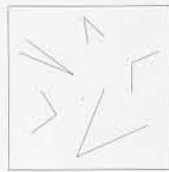
1. New leadership. A new CEO may come in and want his own mark placed on the company.
2. Financial reasons. The company may have undergone reorganization and a new identity will convey (or hide) this—case in point, the newer United Airlines brand.
3. Prospective analysis of the market. Perhaps XYZ company has been doing the same thing for years but now plans to shift its marketing positioning to a new area, and it would like the new image to reflect this.
4. Mergers. Two companies merge to form one.

The graphic designer must find out what the client is trying to accomplish with their logo redesign, and must make recommendations for how these goals might be best accomplished. For instance, my studio was asked to redo a mark for a large aerospace company. Upon our research we determined that what was needed was not a new trademark, but was instead a graphic system that brought all the divisions together. One might have thought we shot ourselves in the foot, but instead we won the respect and admiration of the company for years to come.

*"A successful mark is one that engages the view and allows them to play a small 'interactive' mind game with it."  
-Gregory Thomas*

## line

The way in which a line is drawn can evoke different moods or meanings. A composition dealing with right angles at various degrees produces a very "sharp" and potentially dangerous situation, whereas a soft, sensuous line implies a gentle, nonaggressive attitude.



## shape

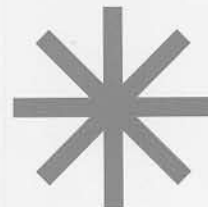
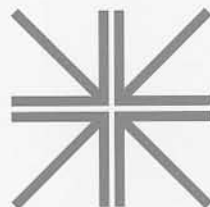
Although we have already discussed the origin of the three distinctive shapes in the introduction, it is important to realize that a square is the most visually stable. Next are the circle and the triangle. Rectangles, both horizontal and vertical, and ellipses are the most visually unstable.



**Far Right**  
An example of a logo that uses figure ground technique

## figure ground

Ever see the drawing of a vase that could be two faces as well? This is a good example of figure ground, where positive and negative shapes interact to provide a mental puzzle. Yin yang, gestalt, in many languages it means the same.



## pattern

When dealing with geometric shapes, it is often tempting to continue the thought and create a pattern using elements of the trademark. The example shown above through right illustrates

the progression. While sometimes this approach is useful in branding, it often runs the risk of placing the mark in legal jeopardy, since the simplicity of this approach also makes it less unique.

## letterform

Using common letterforms but in unique configurations can create a often simple but effective means to trademark development. Traditional typography refers to these as "ligatures" which you will frequently see in old style fonts in the form of "Ff," "ft."



## contrast

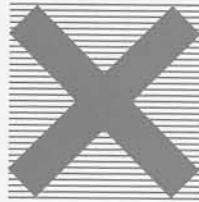
Variations of letterform weight and size also help create a subtle meaning in the wordmark that could not be obtained otherwise. These examples are reminiscent of the skylines as well as the personality of the cities they represent.

CHICAGO

newyork

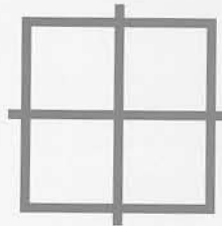
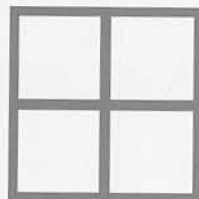
## image field

A letterform or design can find an environment in a number of different situations. Reversed out, overprinted and more. It is important to realize that the area around the object can define it as well as a literal drawing of it.



### Left

An example of a logo that uses ligatures for the logo itself and image field techniques in its final application.



## perception

Simple linear and geometric forms can convey completely different meanings with the slightest modification. The first figure above makes the square strong and dominant,

while the center of the square becomes weak and unanchored. The center figure becomes tranquil with all elements creating harmony. The final figure is the complete

opposite of the first figure in that the center elements become strong and aggressive, while the square becomes subordinate.

## The Ten Criteria for Development of a Successful Logo, Symbol or Icon

Whether you're at the beginning of your design career or whether you are internationally recognized in the field of corporate identity, the primary considerations in the creation of a trademark, symbol or icon are the same. Immediate identification, as well as the visual definition of what a company or product is or how it works, are the objectives. Developing a successful symbol requires meeting many different criteria. Listed below is a checklist of ten criteria that must be considered in the creation of a good logo, symbol or icon:

### 1. Visibility

Will it stand out in its surroundings to provide quick and memorable identification. Seeing how a logotype stands out among the clutter of a metropolitan downtown is a good visual test for many trademarks.

### 2. Application

How well can the symbol be used in a variety of applications? From the resolution of a video monitor to the heat stamping on a product, it must withstand numerous technical applications.

### 3. Distinctiveness

Will the application distinguish itself from its competition? It is important to note that many legal decisions are made based on how similar a mark is to its competitor, and many challenges have been won in the courtroom.

### 4. Simplicity/Universality

Is the symbol's concept easy to identify? As those who have "overworked" a drawing will know, there is a point at which to stop embellishment. On the other hand, a few additional lines in a composition can make the difference in its readability.

And don't forget cultural readability. One must be sensitive to any cultural or religious connotations the mark may convey.

### 5. Retention

Someone who will identify with a mark must play a small game of mental tennis with it. (The Bank of America's symbol is a good example of this—once a person has read the shape of the letterforms as an eagle, they will never see it any other way.) If a symbol is too easy to read, the viewer will feel no sense of discovery and thus no personal equity with the mark.

### 6. Color

It is good practice to design everything in black and white first, while keeping in mind the color applications. A good symbol must work in a number of technologies—such as a fax or photocopier—that are unable to display the subtle nuances of some color palettes or blind embossing.

### 7. Descriptiveness

Does the symbol reveal to some extent the nature of the company or product? A good symbol is one that is able to do this without being an exact literal translation.

### 8. Timelessness

It was once hoped that a good trademark would last from fifteen to twenty years. Now we are seeing complete turnovers of identity programs within a five-year period. Even so, you still need to be careful not to follow current trends, for they have a limited life expectancy.

### 9. Modularity

Will the potential mark be adaptable to numerous applications? We have seen the best marks diluted in their presentation by the way the support typography or other graphic elements are handled. All the elements must work together to form a single voice.

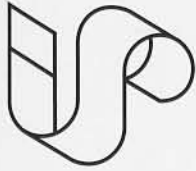
### 10. Equity

The age, use and recognition of a mark is also a primary consideration in its development. Knowing when and what to redesign are important considerations for the designer. If one were to be approached to redesign the Coca-Cola script, it would be hard to replace the value the current mark retains.

Some have different opinions about the value of equity. For instance, in a dramatic move within the last year, Steve Jobs of Apple decided to change the famous Apple symbol from multicolored to a solid one-color mark. His rationale was that the old symbol reflected too much on the early days of Apple and not where the company was headed. In challenging this move, I would propose that it was those early days of invention by two young men in a garage that should be kept alive.

## The Three Categories

of Logos, Symbols and Icons



All marks fall under one of three categories:

### 1. Descriptive Marks

A descriptive mark uses visual imagery relating to the client's product or service. By manipulating the letterforms of an "i" and a "p" (left), Integrated Paper Corporation demonstrates their area of activity and defines the initials of the company.

### 2. Symbolic Marks

A symbolic mark takes the descriptive mark one step further, literally incorporating a figurative element, such as the former Bank of America "bird in flight" logo (left), in order to communicate the intangible or abstract—the client's positioning, mission, ethics, etc.

### 3. Typographic Marks

Sometimes letterforms are used as a starting point. A typographic approach must include some graphic organization or addition to its content that will enhance it. The letterforms for GTE (left) fall within this category.