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Logos Mean More than You Think

It is shocking that companies do not seem to recognise the profound influence logos can have.

Airbnb, the home rental service and latest darling of Silicon Valley, launched a new logo in mid-July to much fanfare. As part of a rebranding campaign, the new logo was named Bélo and was said to signify people, places and love. But internet users saw something entirely different.

Gizmodo wrote that “**The New Airbnb Logo Is a Sexual Rorschach Test For Our Time**”! And the BBC reported that “**Airbnb’s new logo faces social media backlash**”. And the problem didn’t stop at internet users photoshopping the logo into all kinds of strange adaptations. It also emerged that Airbnb’s logo **is almost identical** to an existing one used by an IT company called **Automation Anywhere**. The two companies are apparently “working cooperatively to address the issue.”

This is not the first time that a company has goofed up when renovating or changing its logo. Some years ago, **GAP attempted to change its logo** but abandoned the effort when it met with a fast and furious backlash on both Twitter and Facebook.

It always surprises me that companies get themselves into such hot water over their logos. Creating a new logo is expensive; BP Amoco, for instance, spent US\$7.8 million on the design of its new brand logo and the Norwegian Post Office, Posten, more than US\$55 million to refurbish its logo. A little research can yield key insights to avoid

putting out the wrong message and ruining the potential impact of such large investments.

Shapes shape perceptions

Logos can also influence consumer judgments of the physical characteristics of the brand. For instance, **our research shows** that angular logos lead consumers to make inferences about the hardness (inflexibility for services) and durability of the product or service associated with the logo. Rounded logos, however, lead consumers to infer that associated products or services are soft (customer responsive for services) and comfortable. Airbnb has chosen well in this regard with softer, more circular logo characteristics to give a sense of comfort to potential guests. Where it went wrong was failing to see the shape as a whole and what it could be construed as.

This effect is compounded by the presence of verbal claims in the ad that match its graphical inferences. In our study, consumers liked a product more and were willing to pay more for it if the logo shape inferences were consistent with the verbal advertisement.

While companies should choose logos that have aesthetic properties that reinforce the desired image of the brand, they should also be aware of consumer perceptions of the whole image.

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To all the companies contemplating refurbishing or changing their logo, please do your homework. Ask consumers what they associate with the new logo and whether they like it. Consumer competitions are a good idea. The Octopus Card of the Hong Kong MTR, the territory's mass transit system, which had a wildly successful consumer competition to name the transit card in 1996, is a good example. In such cases, there are three benefits: you can crowd source the logo options enhancing consumer engagement, warn consumers of an impending change and create publicity for your brand.

However, this is only step one as it does not shield you from the problem Airbnb encountered. For that, you need to do some additional research. You should shortlist a set of logos from the crowd sourcing effort, based on a set of criteria for choosing your potential logo, then you would do due diligence to ensure that the subset of logos you have chosen are not similar to existing logos. Next, you would go to your target consumers and ask them what they associate the logo options with, making sure that there are no negative associations, verbal or visual. The final step is to ask consumers if the logos had the associations that you desired, along specific benefit dimensions, for example, comfort, and also how much they liked each logo. Now you can choose. If you are international like Airbnb or intend to be international, then you need to sample target consumers from the relevant markets.

Going with internal opinions is like playing Russian roulette. Another perspective can't hurt.

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