

Mermaids, and why we like 'em

Cristopher Gunter

A few months back Starbucks unveiled a new logo, stripped of some earlier flourish and color and – most notably – stripped of text. In the inevitable evolution of corporate identity, Starbucks correctly concluded that their siren is more powerful alone than were she to continue sharing space with the company name. Why is this a good thing?



1971



1987



1992



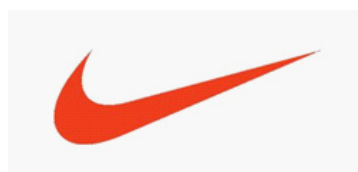
2011

As brands evolve their totems must as well. The Starbucks brand is more about permission to indulge oneself than merely transacting beverages, and including the word “coffee” in the trademark is both redundant and limiting at the same time. Simplifying the logo to a distinctive graphic makes it bolder, more identifiable and, ultimately, more flexible.

But making a design simple is not without its challenges – even more so now than forty years ago (when Starbucks launched) due to the growing number of communication platforms on which graphics appear. Printing technologies are improving but increasingly incompatible with one another. Similarly, sign manufacturing has limitations that can affect logo color and stroke. Add to that the vagaries of vinyl in fleet graphics; embroidery for aprons and shirts; and, of course, the unpredictability of liquid crystals and pixels within our computers, smart phones and televisions. Each media has its own limitations of color, texture, sheen and fabrication and the thoughtful graphic designer must anticipate all of this during the design process.

Some consumer product logos have evolved so elegantly that it may be difficult to appreciate the hard work required to develop them. Patrick Burgoyne, editor of the monthly *Creative Review*, suggests that three attributes contribute to a logo’s enduring success: simplicity; the use of friendly or beloved elements; and, sometimes, visual trickery.

Interestingly, the new Starbucks mark illustrates the use of all three criteria. She is friendly like a fairy godmother, her linework is economical and restrained, and with more tightly cropped fins and hair, the mermaid coyly conceals the Rubenesque qualities of her early years. It will take some time for the new mark to make its way on to all packaging and storefronts, even the corporate headquarters has yet to re-sign. Make no mistake however, this siren is finally ready for her close-up.



Nike’s swoosh is about as simple as they come yet the energetic checkmark contains a mix of angles and curves that connote speed; apples are iconically friendly, made more so when they’re obviously good enough to eat; Jack is actually “in” the box, even if the hexagon is made dimensional only through a simple play of light and shadow.