

## A Case for Graphic Design

by Neil Tortorella

When my son was about 18 months to 2 years old, I remember driving with him snuggly fitted into his back seat throne. He would point and say, "McDono," "K-Mart," and the biggy, "Toys 'R Us" as we drove past the stores. Geez, the kid's a genius! He's reading at barely two. I bet he'll finish Harvard by 10! Well, the fleeting thoughts of my grand contribution to the gene pool were short lived. I knew better.

To me, this was one of the greatest implications of the power of design. Here was this little guy, who could hardly walk and barely talk, yet he could easily identify and associate corporate logos. To him, these were not letters and words, they were simply shapes and colors he'd seen time and time again through various media. That, my friends, is case in point about the power of a consistently delivered design program.

We've seen many ways companies compete, striving to stand out from the growing crowd. The 1980s were about price, the 90s about quality and technology. As these evolve into commodities, design is becoming the new landscape where companies do battle for positioning, mindshare and increased sales. Tom Peters, in an edition of @issue said, "In a world loaded with stuff that looks like all the other stuff and performs like all the other stuff, it (design) is a way to stand out."

The business world is beginning to discover design. When thoughtfully researched, well executed and applied consistently, design translates into increased brand equity and, ultimately, a healthier bottom line. When applied systematically, it can produce economies of scale.

Although no one has developed a reliable way to put a solid dollar value on graphic design, there is much good research going on. Product design is a bit more clear. Take, for example, the Apple iMac. It's unconventional design and use of color (not even a hint of beige) translated to sales of more than two million in it's first year and boosted Apple's stock price from \$15 to \$70 per share at the time. Not a bad showing.

In the area of print and web design, consistency is the key. A consumer expects a product's literature, packaging, web site, etc. to work hand-in-hand. What is often perceived as quality is, in reality, a matter of consistency. Everything a company puts before the public should work together to reinforce the brand.

Think, for a moment, about your impression of a company whose literature is shoddy and unprofessional. What are your feelings about them and the quality of their product or service. Their sales rep may give you a polished speech about the virtues of dealing with them and the wonders of their product, but what goes on in the back of your mind? What happens when their competitor comes in with a similar product supported with professional literature that is well executed and easy to understand. The rep

also points you to their web site which ties in seamlessly with the literature. Who do you feel more comfortable dealing with? Do you feel they run a “tighter ship?” What about the bottom line? Maybe the first company’s product cost less. Does it run through you mind that maybe there’s a reason? Are they using quality parts? Will they even be around a few years from now when you need help?

For better or worse, we live in a world that is over communicated and visually cluttered. A quickly and easily understood visual message is often what separates an “okay” brand from a great one.

Design, in particular graphic design, can set the stage. A customer will often see your logo before they have any dealings with your company. A brochure or a visit to a web site will precede a visit from a sales rep. What message are you sending out? Does your identity jibe with the personality of your company? Or do your materials display a slight case of multiple personality? Is the image portrayed at one location the same as another?

The investment in quality graphic design simply makes good business sense. Except for the smallest of projects, design fees are usually a small portion of the overall project costs. Typically, a small additional investment in the level of design quality can produce a significantly higher ROI.

So, in closing, I have to report that at the ripe age of 8, my son is (happily) still attending elementary school. But, when it comes to identifying corporate brands, he most likely holds his own against any Harvard grad. And that is what successful graphic design is all about.