

Graphic Design is a Mickey Mouse Concern.

On a cold, dark day in the middle of the Depression, surprisingly, Americans plopped down what little money they had to watch a feature-length animated film called "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." The rest is history.

From his first big success, a graphic designer with good business sense named Walt Disney built one of the most powerful and enduring brand identities in the world.

In a 1994 Total Research EquiTrend survey, the Walt Disney Company was ranked as America's premier brand. In fact, with fiscal 1994 income of \$1.7 billion on revenues of \$8.5 billion, Disney is one of the most valuable and influential entertainment companies in the world. After the stunning \$19 billion takeover of Capital Cities/ABC Inc., it dominates its category.

Disney's business boils down to protecting and capitalizing on the brand identity created over 60 years ago by that graphic designer named Walt.

Graphic design has been, until recently, primarily a trade occupation. Today it has spawned a visual communications profession. Walt Disney was a visual communications professional.

Today, the visual communications professional is related to the traditional graphic designer but has expanded his or her expertise to include marketing strategy, advertising technique, business development, product development and corporate and brand positioning.

Yesterday, the graphic designer served advertising agencies and publications by providing layouts for ads, brochures, magazines, books, newspapers, etc. And, while this function still exists for graphic designers, today there is an additional opportunity for those who are capable: that of serving corporations by providing positioning and

identification solutions for both companies and their products or services through intelligent, coordinated visual communications.

We live in a visual world. Visual elements influence opinions and attitudes about products and companies. A brochure's quality of photography, design, paper, and printing influences a reader's opinion of a company even before they read it. In fact, it may influence whether or not they read it. Especially if it is the reader's first introduction to the company or product.

In the high tech world of computers, it seems every new release of software, every new operating system, has a primary feature—more graphics. Why do our computers make increasing use of icons, symbols and signs to guide us through our work? The claim is that they are becoming more "user-friendly." Communication is quicker, less strenuous, and more memorable with the effective use of graphics.

Frequently, computer software manuals have all the documentation necessary to teach the operation of every feature of the program. Yet hundreds of books and videos, CDs and tutorials exist for popular programs that do the same thing the manuals do (for an additional fee). How do they succeed over the manual? They are more visual. Often, that's virtually the only difference. The same information is probably in the thick manual—in page after page of black and white text.

These are indications that the orientation of our culture has moved from being verbal to being visual.

If you're over 40 years old, chances are you were raised as a verbal communicator. Throughout your school years, the emphasis was on reading and writing. Your training was in spelling, grammar, how to diagram sentences, deal with participles, etc. You are a member of a verbal generation. Like your parents before you.

If, however, you're under 40 years old, chances are you're a member of the visual generation. You were probably raised on television, movies, music and MTV. The educational emphasis, we must admit, was on sounds,

symbols, signs, pictures and icons. These are the tools we used to communicate with others and the means by which others communicated with us.

This shift from a verbal to a visual society is a primary factor that businesses must effectively deal with to prosper. Marketers will need the intelligent application of symbols, icons, and pictures to communicate messages to customers and prospects. And as they do, the need to coordinate the various forms of visual communication will become increasingly important, especially as the pressure swells to keep costs down.

The situation is compounded by the fact that we live in the age of "sound-bite decision making." We are trained by the television newscast. As the increase of available information has overwhelmed us, we must find a way to cope with it all.

We skim the surface, gather a little information here and a little information there, quickly piece it together into something resembling an understanding, and move on to the next issue. We limit our information to the least we need to know. And we, with our short attention spans, determine how much that will be. We cope, but at a price. It results in knowing a little about everything but not much in depth about anything.

This makes it critical that marketers' statements made about their product or service be clear, consistent and comprehensible. The experienced visual design professional can develop a coordinated solution that supports clarity, provides consistency and enhances comprehension.

Marketing executives today want increased leverage and synergy in their efforts to influence purchase decisions. Business executives demand an increase in spending efficiencies and in bottom line results.

Visual communications professionals respond. Even in creating a logo, they work to create a logo that can become an icon. It isn't enough to just be pretty. It needs to work as hard as possible for the success of the brand. A brand icon's effect on the brand's perceived identity can be as

important as the brand name itself, so it is crucial that the effect be one that supports the intended message. Consider the positive examples of the Quaker Oat man, the Betty Crocker portrait, the Apple apple, the Gerber baby, the CBS eye, and even the distinctive typeface designs of Coca-Cola, Kellogg and Campbell's. On the other hand, there are many examples of logos that contribute nothing to the message intended. Sadly, they often obscure it.

A logo is only one of hundreds of different ways, or points of contact, by which prospects and customers encounter the brand, each with varying degrees of impact potential. It is critical that brand contact points be managed as thoroughly as possible for maximum positive effect. Visual communications professionals employ street-smart pragmatism when developing strategies and solutions. Often a seemingly minor contact with the brand produces the greatest impact, particularly if those brands have very little, or no, advertising support.

Some people think graphic design issues are unimportant. But in this global marketplace with its short attention span, its visual orientation, its different languages, its overwhelming glut of data, the role of the visual communications professional is increasingly critical.

Disney's future success depends on how well they protect and capitalize on the value of the Disney brand identity, created over 60 years ago by a graphic designer named Walt. Therefore, if someone tells me graphic design issues are Mickey Mouse issues, I say, "That's my point."

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