

Brand-Name Leadership

A new corporate logo says a lot about the company's CEO.

By Tony Spaeth

Nothing reflects a CEO's ideas and strategies more than the company he leads. And nothing offers a quicker glimpse of an organization's image than its logo. So it comes as no surprise that last year's corporate brandings and re-brandings served a broad range of chief executives' strategic purposes. New leaders often expressed their presence with a broad change, while veteran CEOs brushed away cobwebs to create a fresh start. Some trademarks were born from mergers, some from acquisitions; many were simply attempts at renewing a brand. So how successful were the most recent crop of logos—and, consequently, CEOs—at accomplishing their new missions? Some more than others.

Alltel is a regional telephone company with a land-lines heritage, operations in twenty-seven U.S. states, and hungry new competitors. But its image couldn't have been worse: old, cold, and insensitive—and the logo it has used since 1983 didn't help. President and CEO Scott Ford (who had taken over from his founding father) was determined to change the company's culture itself, as well as its image. His goal: to be the newest, freshest, and friendliest telecom provider. The Burnett Group, the design firm that has

With its cramped and tortured letterforms, the old "Alltel" was high on my personal list of toad-princes, overdue for a designer's kiss. The new mark is fresher, simpler, and more direct. And it's an improvement in legibility, despite the negative/positive fragmentation of the name (visually, a risky tactic). "We knew people might have to work a little harder to see the 'a,'" says designer Steve Burnett, "but once they see it, they learn it for good. It makes the brand a little more interesting."



worked with Alltel for twenty years and designed the company's last six annual reports, helped Ford create a new trademark within three weeks. At launch in April 2005, Ford said with conviction, "Today we are introducing a new symbol that better positions our company to compete amid the dramatic changes taking place in our industry."

This merger of wireless providers was simply consolidation in an overcrowded category. But Sprint CEO-designate Gary Forsee wanted something new, a "forward-moving, energetic, dynamic new brand," as laid out in the company's internal talking points. So he decided to go with "Sprint Nextel Corp." as the formal corporate name but

to feature a redesigned Sprint logo as the “go-to-market brand name” of the combined companies. (The Nextel name will survive, under Sprint, “as a key product name.”) Consultants Lippincott Mercer worked on strategy, positioning, and design of the new Sprint trademark, replacing the two-decade-old speeding-diamond mark with a symbol that resembles a pin dropping, in yellow-and-black to honor (at least theoretically) the Nextel brand livery.

With the help of TV advertising that animates the pin-drop symbol, the new mark has seated quickly and with more appeal than the old symbol. The new symbol also lends needed weight to the rather delicate Sprint wordmark. But the dominating use of yellow and black, colors better suited to such rugged brands as DeWalt and Caterpillar, will soon prove unnecessarily limiting for Sprint; we’ll probably see the yellow toned down in time. On balance, Sprint’s logo is a strong new corporate presence, changed legitimately for the sake of change, and only a little compromised (in formal name and color) to assure a degree of equity for Nextel.

Last year’s biggest telecom re-branding, and by far the boldest, came in November when SBC’s Edward Whitacre capped twenty-one years of corporate conquest by



assuming an acquired brand’s name. At long last, the Baby Bell he had led since 1984 became the parent by acquiring the remnants of AT&T and adopting its identity (albeit significantly tweaked). Starting life as Southwestern Bell, the smallest of the seven Baby Bells created in the breakup of AT&T, SBC outgrew its siblings in part by acquiring two of them, Pacific Telesis and Ameritech. By then acquiring AT&T, it surpassed Verizon, the biggest other Bell descendant, to become America’s largest telecom company.

Whitacre has reason to be proud of this achievement. And it was time to re-brand SBC anyway to make the company a more global player. Even though Whitacre had dropped the provincial “Southwestern” for “SBC” in 1995, the company never really escaped the old name. Moreover, with very few exceptions, initials like SBC are a weak branding strategy. (With 129 years of history behind it,

AT&T is one of those exceptions.) So when Whitacre announced the acquisition in January 2005, he proclaimed, “The AT&T brand is terrific, and I’m certain it will live on in a way that makes [AT&T] proud and [SBC] proud.” Translated, in hindsight: “Aha! I’ll make us them!”

Brand-bloggers mostly agreed that AT&T was the better name choice, but they debated whether the 1984 Bass/Yager-designed globe (or its 1999 shadowed version) should also survive, or whether it would be more honest and effective to design a truly new “AT&T.” Whitacre made the call. I imagine he might have said to Interbrand, the designers, “The globe is the brand, and it says what we want to say, but let’s make it friendlier. I don’t want to hear people referring to it as a ‘Death Star’ anymore.”

The change is bold—but could have been bolder. The name decision, although not easy, was ultimately a no-brainer. The AT&T name, even after considerable abuse (from split-outs like Lucent and NCR and spin-offs like AT&T Wireless and other diminutions), retained greater luster than “SBC.” But I would have honored a more aggressive design decision that would’ve courageously, and more honestly, created a *new* AT&T.

As for design execution, the letterforms are indeed softer and friendlier but, perhaps, too much so. And the globe



is, frankly, a puzzlement. Its transparency is meant “to represent clarity and vision”—a nice thought, but the mottled and shadowed see-through patterns are more likely to effect muddiness and confusion. And in the new mark, the widening of the lines no longer renders highlights but is an arbitrary event that can best be understood as an allusion to a remembered mark. Indeed, if you look at the old and new globes side by side, the clarity, vision, and graphic strength of the 1984 original is still hard to beat.

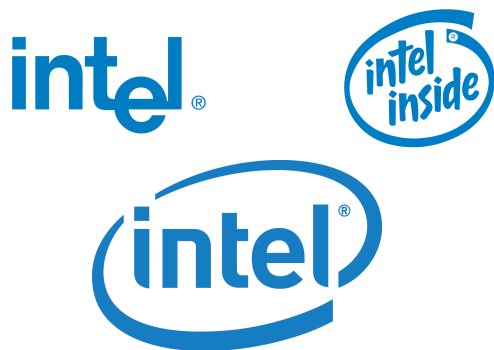
Whereas SBC bought AT&T’s house, redecorated it, and moved in, and Sprint remodeled its own house to accommodate Nextel (a new bride?), the future Chemtura set out “to build a new house, rather than renovate two old ones”—actual words the company used in guiding the identity planners.

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With a market cap of \$3 billion, the combination of Crompton and Great Lakes could credibly seek the position of “the best specialty chemicals company in the world.” But this audacious goal would require both partners to transcend their previous identities. On July 1, 2005, when the merger (and the new name) took effect, CEO Bob Wood put it clearly: “This is a transformational merger. . . . [We] have been working intensely to create a new company with a new organizational design and new work processes. . . . Our vision is to create the world’s best specialty chemicals company, not simply to add companies together.”

The creation of an entirely new company required a comprehensive identity platform. Consultants from Siegel & Gale guided Wood’s team through the necessary process, helping to articulate the defining position, cultural values, and image goal, and then, of course, to resolve the name and logo design, the objective of which was (quite literally) “to make a splash in our industry.”

A clear example of leadership through branding, the new name might seem strained at first, but it appropriately blends “chemistry” and “future.” It’s also fully functional, so it should seat quickly. The design is appealing, expressive, and supports an attitude of pride.



If the new AT&T celebrates a leader’s victory, the new Intel celebrates a leadership change. Andy Grove, Intel’s senior adviser and former CEO, is of course a living legend—and the greater the past, the more the future must promise. To quickly build a new legend, new CEO Paul Otellini knew he must not only change the strategic paradigm but communicate that change with impact and credibility. So a year ago, he hired Samsung marketing star Eric Kim and made him a direct report. Kim, an outsider who, as reported in *Business Week*, “could play bad cop and push through unpopular changes when necessary,” then retained Inter Public Group’s McCann Erickson for advertising counsel and Erickson’s FutureBrand unit for identity work.

On October 20 last year, Kim indeed “played bad cop.” He told the leadership team that to put impact and credibility behind the new positioning (and implicitly, the new leadership), the 37-year-old “dropped-e” logo and the 15-year-old “intel inside” marketing badge must go. To

replace both marks, FutureBrand designed a wordmark-in-a-swoosh, essentially a variation of the “intel inside” swoosh. It’s a balancing act intended by the designers “to express meaningful change yet retain the equity of a stable and trusted company.”

Although the change could have been more aggressive, this is nevertheless a solid case of a leader re-branding, to help effect corporate change. But few customers will see a “new Intel” in this mark nor even a real leap ahead; it’s essentially the same brand, taking a cautious step forward.

The benefit of the change is more technical than strategic. Some old marks are great while others are merely old, and the old Intel has long been on my toad list. “Funky” described it best; it was distinctive but kind of awkward. Its cherished internal meaning, “INTEgrated ELEctronics,” had little external relevance. And because the dropped-e logo could not be used to convey Intel’s ingredient-brand message in an appealing way on third-party products, “Intel inside” had to be created, thus setting up an unstable and diluting two-logo branding situation. The primary significance of the new mark is that it eliminates this problem, along with the e-mark, enabling Intel to put all its pride and power behind a single coherent presence.



This is a “brand refreshment” story. It’s also the re-integration of corporate and category brands, as in the Intel case, replacing two logos with one.

As we all know, Visa is engaged in a continuing and epic battle with MasterCard (and others) for share in the bank-card business, which is, in turn, morphing into a virtually plastic-free “transaction platforms” industry. It’s not a card, silly—it’s just a number. Visa’s brandmark, however, was literally a picture of a card (originally, the 1958 BankAmericard) and thus was an image-limiting and business-limiting symbol. In 2001, a “corporate” mark (Visa with a swoosh) was added to open things up a bit, but this didn’t solve the problem. It just added a layer of confusion.

In 2003, CEO Malcolm Williamson hired John Elkins, CEO of FutureBrand, to the new post of global marketing and brand manager. In due course, Elkins hired an experienced logo designer, Greg Silveria, as well as other firms, to help design new logos. But well into

the process, Visa needed a temporary logo for testing purposes, so Silveria dashed off the “twisted serif” idea in a matter of minutes. Surprise: It tested as well as the work other consultants produced after eight months of due process. Visa business managers also liked it and chose it as the organization’s new logo.

Indeed, it was a brilliant solution. The name itself is a brand’s greatest asset, and the Visa wordmark (already modernized for the corporate/swoosh version) was perfectly functional. There was no need to change it—except, perhaps, that its only distinctive element, the serif on the “V,” was a bit dated. Silveria simply gave this feature a creative twist.

The CA story, like Intel’s, is that of a leadership change and brand repositioning. In 2001, then-new CEO Sanjay Kumar spoke of a new mission, a new business model, a new attitude (“focused, focused, focused,” said the ads), and a new logo. In the case of the logo, at least, it was indeed change for the better; good design had never been a priority for founder Charles B. Wang. Five years ago, things indeed looked better for CA. But they soon got worse: In 2004, Kumar and four colleagues were indicted for diddling the books.



Yet by the following year, the business fundamentals, though still soft, were firming up. An almost entirely new leadership team, led by IBM veteran John Swainson, set out to transform the company. There was now every reason to say, “Forget last year, focus on the future; once again, this is a new CA,” from which it is a short leap to “so let’s change the logo again.” But according to CA’s CMO Don Friedman, “changing the brandmark was the *last* thing we thought about. First, we had to transform our internal understanding of the business we’re in. And it isn’t about computers any more. It’s about a huge new need, far more holistic, for Enterprise IT Management. EITM, we call it.”

To sell this idea, the new team concluded that it would be beneficial to change the company’s brandmark and its “’70s name.” Says Friedman: “‘Computer’ no longer says anything more than ‘hardware.’” The old logo had to go, primarily because it narrowed and undermined the EITM positioning goal. “We considered but quickly ruled

out creating a new name,” Friedman says. “But everybody calls us CA, which works fine. Even in California and Canada, context usually takes care of identifying us.” (To finish the job, in February the company legally changed its name to CA Inc.)

This was an evolutionary change, appropriately done partly for the sake of change. But it was also meant to signal a simpler, more straightforward personality. As to its message, Friedman says that it was hard to connect the 2001 “focus” story to the 2005 “unify/simplify” one. (He adds that he never understood why the “a” was the focus of the 2001 logo.) By bringing the “C” and the “A” closer together “to symbolize unification and simplification, the new logo expresses our Enterprise strategy—to unify and simplify IT management.”

The design work by New York’s Sequel Studio is appropriately simple and straightforward. The name decision, however, looks like something temporary. Will “CA” ever cease to evoke the “Computer Associates” ghost? It’s true that such initials as DHL and HSBC have largely escaped their original meanings, but they had the advantage of millions of free street-level exposures. CA, in contrast, has to pay for virtually all its media exposures. It’s a judgment call, for sure, but my own judgment



is that it would cost less to seat a distinctive, appealing new name than to free “CA” of its history. To move to initials is almost never to move to strength.

Here’s yet another logo change due to leadership change. New Wolters Kluwer chairman and CEO Nancy McKinstry arrived at this \$4 billion Amsterdam-based knowledge provider in 2003 to find a mélange of some three hundred diverse brands that had no clear, common driving idea. Through re-branding, she sought to make a more coherent (and cost-effective) identity, committed to the centering brand promise of “Content in Context.”

But the corporation’s existing “publisher” identity, reinforced by its blue-book symbol, would be the wrong image for a multimedia information-services provider. The book had to go, but the company needed a new common visual icon to link diverse business divisions. As McKinstry put it, “by combining our [strong brands]

under the strong Wolters Kluwer umbrella, we will be even more visible to all our customers as their partners in innovation.” To represent “Content in Context,” Landor’s Bob Matza put a square into a circle and said, “Don’t read more into it than that; it’s a simple idea.” Representing the parent with a graphic non-verbal symbol permits Wolters’ many sub-brands to keep their names, while losing their logos in the interest of corporate focus, coherence, and impact.

Strategically, it’s a win. The brand’s architectural design will create a more powerful and coherent presence. Given the company’s long name, a symbol is doubly justified: It provides the distinctiveness and memorability needed to compensate for the name, as well as a means of visual endorsement for sub-brand names.

That said, soft, shaded, rounded, and multicolor marks, enabled by technology, are in fashion. But while there are no hard “rules of identity,” there is much to be said for clear, sharp colors and hard edges where definitive clarity is the goal. Indeed, in color, this logo is a pretty thing, but it is less pretty (and less recognizable) in black-and-white. Marks so dependent on color (and good reproduction) make me nervous. More importantly, both the symbol and the idea it is meant



to express seem a bit soft and ephemeral. (In due course, a new slogan will likely replace “Content in Context.” Presumably the mark will endure, no longer requiring explanation.)

EDF’s identity change is really about a changing Europe. Specifically, it signals the repositioning of France’s leading electric-power company to better compete throughout a deregulated, more freely competitive continent. According to chairman and CEO Pierre Gadonneix, “The change in EDF’s visual identity testifies to the group’s . . . opening up to Europe and to new markets, customers, and investors.” Although the organization retained its “EDF” initials, the full name “Electricité de France” is no longer spelled out in the logo (and has virtually disappeared from the corporate website).

Designers at Plan créatif (whose small “c” presumably demonstrates creativity) added the bright orange

symbol, a calligraphic turbine/flower/sun/person, to the EDF letterforms and lowercased the “e” to be distinctive and more friendly. (The press release explains that the “e” also expresses “technology,” because e = *electron*. The ingenuity of PR writers, who can feel obliged to explain each tweak in a logo, never ceases to amaze me.)

Strategically, this is on target, and creatively, the new symbol is both strong and appealing. As HSBC and others have demonstrated, initials can be made to live on their own, to grow away from their history, though France lingers in the “F” here. But initials are compromises, and a new name would have been a bolder commitment, easy to justify for a company with so many vans and trucks to provide free brand exposures. A next step, perhaps?

This is not about changing what we do or how we do it,” said Eric Parsons, president and CEO of Portland, Ore.-based Standard Insurance Co. “It’s about bringing visibility to our strengths, and to our position as an industry leader.” It was also about the decision to demutualize and thus to face a new audience (investors), which is always a good reason for rethinking identity.



TheStandardSM
Positively different.

Brand research by Portland-based agency HMM revealed the following key findings: The brand *weaknesses* were relatively technical: lack of clarity, low visibility, and “yesterday.” The name “The Standard” was catching on, but the banner wasn’t. The brand *strengths*, in contrast, were substantive, like “truly different in the sincerity of their passion for the individual insured.” (Agents said The Standard was different, for example, in that its loss adjusters would work directly with the insured employee, not through HR intermediaries). HMM’s re-branding recommendation, in effect, was: “Go ahead, wave your flag. Be ‘The Standard’ by which others are measured.”

And it worked. Direct, simple, and to the point, the new mark looks fresh and proud. Is the flag solution original? No, but who cares? “We debated this but not heavily,” the designers explained. The flag is relevant literally (a flag is a “standard”), communicatively appropriate, and graphically effective. The old banner, in contrast, confused design with narrative (the little crowd of people under a

cloudlike wing was meant to say “Wing of Providence,” but who could know?)

Inspiring leaders can be found in the nonprofit arena too. And often, the best consultants and designers are drawn to their causes and contribute services at pro-bono rates if not for free. An example: the board members of YWCA-USA, who found a passionate ally in Margaret Youngblood, a creative director in Landor’s San Francisco office.

The American YWCA is one of a hundred nation-based YWCAs. In 2001, faced with declines in funding and in local chapters (from seven hundred to three hundred), some eighty concerned volunteers participated in a workshop to rethink YWCA’s reasons for being. Two purposes among many (like quality child care, teen pregnancy, and homelessness programs) were chosen as common and defining: the traditional “empowering women” and the more surprising “eliminating racism.”

Led by volunteers such as Kathy Luper of the Fort Worth chapter, a fifteen-person brand committee went to work. Research had confirmed the brand was weak, easily confused with the unrelated YMCA, and misleading (YWCA is women-focused but neither Christian-driven nor youth-



eliminating racism
empowering women
ywca

specific). Landor Associates ultimately presented six re-branding strategies. The least conventional, most provocative, symbol-free “missions logo” shown above was the committee’s unanimous choice. Subsequently, the national YWCA board’s approval was also unanimous.

Yes, what you see above *is* a logo. It is a courageous solution, to my knowledge unprecedented (all text, big slogan, and tiny name?), and it has triggered much discussion, both in identity-design circles and among the three hundred YWCA chapters, the majority of which supported the change while others resisted. YWCA’s board, however, welcomed the ongoing challenge this solution would impose—including the inevitability of future mission change, and thus logo change again.

The old mark was designed by Saul Bass (designer of the old AT&T, shown previously), but frankly, it was not his best work, and widely unpopular among YWCA members. The new mark is creative, conceptually if not graphically exciting, and it will likely succeed in attracting

members and money and reviving the brand. But face it: It is a sign, not a symbol, and its effectiveness will be especially dependent on well-designed, consistent, and respectful implementation.

In this case, Outward Bound USA president John Read was the passionate leader who used a re-branding to help transform the organizational scope, the image, and the marketing impact of this extraordinary brand. And I was privileged to assist him.

You probably know Outward Bound for its work with young people, in the wilderness classroom, as in, “kids in the woods.” But Outward Bound is also a leader in corporate training programs, in programs for urban youth, and increasingly in the design of education in our nation’s elementary, middle, and high schools.

Read was working to not only foster this image but to transform the organization geographically by consolidating the seven autonomous “schools” that made up Outward Bound USA into one stronger entity (in early 2005, five of the seven voted to consolidate, while the other two units will continue, for the time being, under brand charters). Clearly, there was opportunity to re-brand to help communicate both this geographic scaling-up and



Outward Bound® USA



**OUTWARD
BOUND**

the extension of the brand into corporate and school classrooms.

At the same time, this was a chance to address some technical and personality weaknesses in the brand’s presentation, including its low-visibility wordmark-in-symbol, which had led to the use of a second, more visible, all-type logo (and duplicate logos are not healthy, as Intel and Visa have realized). Designer Nat Connacher joined our team and separated the words Outward Bound from their compass-rose symbol so the name could be bigger. Also, the simplified compass symbol could be used to anchor a more flexible signature system; using this symbol, “Outward Bound Wilderness” would now identify itself as just one of several Outward Bound programs, along with “Outward Bound Professional” and “Expeditionary Learning Schools, Outward Bound.” In May 2005, Read launched the new mark as “a symbol of transformation.”

Good work, but, naturally, I am biased. ♦