

By Clement Mok



**Logos**  
Clement Mok discusses designing the effective identity—for yourself and your client—in this ever-changing business climate.

Logos just ain't what they used to be. As a matter of fact, corporate identities ain't what they used to be, either.

There are no mysteries about what's happening around us. More than ever, businesses are having changes thrust upon them. Markets emerge and disappear seemingly overnight. The competition is smarter, even quicker. Product life cycles are shrinking.

In pursuit of larger market shares and providing comprehensive global turnkey solutions, corporations align and realign with new partners, trading in the old for the new, acquiring and creating new businesses almost daily. Executives are asked to rethink and enact effective long-term strategic directions for these brand-new businesses—in short, to invent the future and, while at it, define the new corporate culture, as well.

To achieve this, an organization must create a new vocabulary to proclaim its vision and its value. The new identity must offer more than high profile; it needs to achieve objectives that are both more subtle and more profound than those that have been held traditionally. It must sponsor qualities people want to identify with—create a sense of belonging. Without this, there can be no commitment—internally or externally.

Sadly, the new corporate characters are often about being more global, more accessible, more compelling and more meaningful to more people. An example is the National Audubon Society, originally formed to stop the slaughter of birds for ornamental feathers. The organization is now engaged in battles over topics ranging from water rights to wildlife habitats to toxic waste and pollution control. It competes with many environmental groups for money and support. In an attempt to reach a wider audience, the Society decided to dump its beloved egret logo. In its place is a plain blue flag that stands for every conceivable environmental battle cry, or nothing at all.

As business becomes multi-faceted and more complex, the corporate charter, values and

vision become more generic. Thus the visual interpretation of that identity is neutered, allowing a very broad, non-offensive interpretation. A logo and a corporate identity become nothing more than a sign-off device and a series of templates to format type and pictures.

A clever look and a polished style are no longer enough. The identity requires a well-articulated vision, something more than the desire for profits—something that's definitely hard to come by. The identity also requires a network of compensation systems, human resource policies and most importantly, sound business plans to support the vision.

Designers must have a profound understanding of the corporate charter and vision in order to succeed. We can't invent this; we can only help to illustrate it—this is perhaps, our greatest and newest challenge.

Just as corporations are rethinking their business, we need to rethink the process of developing a logo and corporate identity. To deal in the future, one must persistently revisit and revise the corporate culture. The corporate identity and its development is a continuous and catalytic process, not a singular event in the marketing budget. It needs to be maintained and challenged. This is a shift that runs counter to convention.

The designer needs to mobilize insights and techniques drawn from outside the conventional sphere of communication design to help make the future visible and understandable in the present. Pictorial metaphors and diagrams are invaluable to promoting understanding; imagery needs to evoke rather than merely inform. The new corporate identity must translate ideas and vision into thing; things influence attitudes and attitudes shape values.

Our greatest contribution and challenge is creating a corporate identity that makes these values visible in every product and every environment in which the corporation operates. Only then can design serve as a business asset and strategic partner.