

One Way to Do Branding Badly

Time for more about branding, one of my favorite subjects. This time we're hearing from the Pet Peeve Department.

As I tell my clients, branding is the sum of all contacts and impressions an audience has with a company or organization.

A brand embodies the promises that a company makes to its market in terms of what to expect from it.

These promises are communicated symbolically in the brand's visual identity. If purposeful decisions are not made in creating and managing a brand, a vacuum forms which the company's audience will fill with whatever assumptions come to mind. These haphazard perceptions are rarely to the company's benefit.

An amateurish, poorly conceived brand identity presents its owner as unprofessional and does not inspire confidence. In fact, it creates the opposite, to the detriment of its owner.

One way to ensure that your brand identity will be at best ineffective, and at worst negative marketing, is to hold a logo contest.

Logo contests are to brands as FSBOs (For Sale By Owner) are to home sales. Like representing yourself in court, they are always a bad idea. Logo contests are usually undertaken to save money and to "get the community involved." That makes as much sense as having a contest to see who gets to do your taxes or take out your tonsils. Design is a profession, not an artsy hobby.

Logos are strategic tools that support business and organizational goals. A cute little graphic cannot perform the functions of a thoughtfully developed symbol in communicating the promise of what your market wants from you. Here are three reasons why logo contests are a sure fail:

1. Developing an effective logo requires a lot of effort from of the client as well as the designer.

*...ummm...
it just lacks
a certain
je ne sais
quoi...*



Without a fully engaged client, the designer is working in a vacuum. Since there is little or no designer-client interaction in a logo contest, results are doomed. That's because the best work happens when a trained designer and a thoughtful, engaged client function together as a team, and that doesn't happen in a logo contest.

2. Contests attract non-professionals who have no clue about the function of logos, their role in branding or the process by which visual branding is developed.

3. Contests are also exploitative. They ask a lot of people to work for nothing on the chance of maybe winning a prize. This disrespects everyone involved.

In the long run, contests are more expensive than a professional process because the results are rarely useable or applicable across all media. Entries are often thinly disguised rip-offs of others' work, especially in on-line contests. This can raise unpleasant copyright issues.

Cost is not the highest measure of effectiveness or worth. Logo contests may seem cheap, but the most expensive logo is the one that doesn't do its job.

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