

Words, not read but seen

What has the most impact, a symbol or a written logotype? A new website (and book) might help designers decide

Ever wondered which colours are trending in logo design? Or which shapes are 'in' in the beverage or healthcare or hospitality sectors? Or why logos with two stars in a circle are so popular in the US?

Of course you have. And now there is a website that reveals all. Since the middle of this year, emblematic.com has been reporting on trends in logo design, number-crunching trademark information from the US Patent and Trademark Office dating back to 1884 to give us "data-driven design insights".

The work of James I Bowie PhD, a lecturer at Northern Arizona University, emblematic.com teems with timelines, graphs and bar charts, from which you can discern that squares are twice as popular in trademarks of the American insurance sector as they are among beverage makers, that blue is twice as popular in the US telecoms industry as it is in hospitality, and that leaves may be on the wane in US business as a logo design element.

I'm not sure how useful insights such as these are to designers and marketers, in the US or anywhere else, but the data – painstakingly gathered and analysed – can be diverting. One post that caught my eye was 'Logotype vs. Symbol', which addresses the relative effectiveness of the two types of logo.

As the author of a new book called *Logotype* that collects 1,300 text-based trademarks, I was slightly disturbed to come across a graph claiming that the 'logotype-only' trademark has steadily declined in use over the last 50 years, from 75% in the late 1950s to around 20% today. ▶

▼ Below: Microsoft's Chris Capossela opens the new Microsoft store in Boston.
▶ Right, clockwise from top left: Braun by Wolfgang Schmitten, 1952; Randstad by Total Design (Ben Bos), 1967; The Obstetrician & Gynaecologist journal by Atelier Works (Ian Chilvers), 2008; ENO by CDT (Mike Dempsey), 1991; The Rogers Flooring Company by Tom Rogers, 2009



◀ Maybe my book was onto a loser.

Maybe this is the age of the symbol. Trade is global; symbols convey identity across borders, into foreign linguistic territory. Symbols on the cars, clothes and trainers we buy convey part of who we are. Some corporate emblems, thanks to relentless exposure and policing, have achieved a status and significance far beyond their original function as a trademark. These are the symbols that no longer need their hand held by an accompanying logotype: Apple, Nike, Mercedes, Chanel, Playboy, and a few more.

It's a power elite that others are dying to join. Twitter's branding is now just a streamlined, ascending bird – the bubble wordmark and lowercase 't' are gone. In August, Microsoft replaced its 25 year-old logotype with a combination – logotype + symbol – that is a clear step towards establishing the kind of silent, wordless recognition that its rival has enjoyed for years. The nameless bunch of squares that already fronts Microsoft stores in the US will soon lord it over ads, websites and products.

But no brand gets to ineffable icon status without a bottomless marketing budget to establish its name first, in support of a symbol. Most trademarks being registered now, according to emblematic.com, are that: a combination mark.

So does this mean the slow demise of the text-only trademark? We have to hope not. It's interesting to note another of emblematic.com's bar charts, which tells us that, on average, logotypes last almost five years longer than combination logos (11.7 years against 7.08), and that the majority of Interbrand's Best Global Brands of 2011 depend on logotype-only marks for their visibility.

There are still powerful reasons to go the route of a wordmark or lettermark or monogram, such as the need to establish a distinctive name, or focus on name recognition when marketing funds are limited. To this observer, the innovation in logo design today is occurring away from

the ambiguous gradients, swirls and blobs that pass too often for new symbols.

There are still powerful new symbols being produced, powerful enough perhaps to one day stand on their own. But in terms of invention, words and letters are where the action is. Every name is different and can be expressed in myriad ways. There's never been such typographical diversity available to the designer, or the technological means with which to edit, crop, space, blur, layer, rearrange, reflect and decorate letters and words, and play with the form and meaning of written characters.


At one level, logotypes become symbols. Designers find and reveal images in words, groups of letters and letterforms. Through familiarity or

▼ Below: Shanghai's first Apple Store, located in the city's Pudong district and designed by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson Architecture. The Apple logo features on the 32ft high glass entrance. ▶ Right: YouTube logo by Chad Hurley, 2005

sheer design brilliance, there are many logotypes and lettermarks that could be classed as visual, not verbal – we don't read them, we just see them. These include the corporate marks of 3M, Disney, YouTube, Gap, Pirelli, Facebook, Coca Cola, IBM, Randstad, the V&A, the ENO, Tate and others.

That rich vein of creativity is, I hope, reflected in Logotype's collection of wordmarks, monograms and single-letter marks. As Fontsmith



founder Jason Smith says in the introduction, "An identity in its most basic form is a name. The next layer is the way you present it. That's the clever bit: conveying a message through a name. If you can build an identity in black and white, with just the name and something going on inside it, that's the holy grail." 

Michael Evamy is the author of new book, *Logotype*, out this month from Laurence King; £22.50. evamy.co.uk

