

2009/2010 TREND

REPORT:

**THE VISUAL  
LANGUAGE\***  
**OF BRAND.**

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\*BRAND IDENTITY, PACKAGING, ADVERTISING,  
RETAIL SPACE, WEB, LIVERY, SIGNAGE



2009/2010 Trend Report;  
The Visual Language of Brand.

Dedicated to all businesses who  
actively leverage their brands and  
their brand visual language.

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# A REPORT IN MAJOR VISUAL LANGUAGE TRENDS IN BRAND IDENTITY

*Trends in the visual language of brand identity are driven by many factors from the 'me-too-ism' of designers and their clients mimicking the visual language of market leaders, to new and emerging trends such as 'sustainability' that draw a similar and en-mass visual response from designers all over the world*

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*HOWEVER THE  
BIG QUESTION  
ON TRENDS IN  
BRAND VISUAL  
LANGUAGE IS  
'WHAT EXACTLY  
DO WE DO WITH  
THEM?'*

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When it comes to brands, the thing about visual language is that it not only communicates the essence of a brand and its (hopefully) unique proposition to market, but also provides its audience with cues relative to the other brands in the marketplace. The more a brand is a leader in its market, the greater meaning its visual language has and the more influence it commands.

The brand visual language of the Tiffany's blue - especially when combined with their iconic ribbon and box - is a powerful identifier. It clearly communicates a series of well understood cues such as quality, elegance, sophistication, femininity, design and premium to a broad cross section of its markets in every country they do business.

When the design of visual language appears consistently and repeatedly across a number of brands we identify that as a trend. When a trend is leveraged positively it offers brands the opportunity to communicate an existing set of cues or meanings within a market to their advantage - whether that be a local business wishing to look global, or a global business wishing to look local. Yet, when misunderstood or misused, trends can create inappropriate or confusing visual messaging to the detriment of the brand.

When the most popular trends become widely misused the original brand cues become meaningless. The last decade saw the popularity of the 'all lowercase logotype'. Using all lowercase letters was seen as a way for brands to show their 'friendly', 'down to earth' and 'approachable' side. As this aspect of brand personality became increasingly popular, more and more brands adopted the trend for their visual language, culminating in the re-branding of the National Australia Bank to 'nab'. In terms of trend relevance, when a big bank - any big bank - adopts the visual language of 'friendly', 'down to earth' and 'approachable' the cues of the trend have become compromised.



*OVER THE PAST  
12 MONTHS  
WE HAVE  
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SPANNING  
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MAJOR INDUSTRY  
AND CATEGORY  
OF THE WESTERN  
WORLD.*



The brand expressions we tracked included existing, new and refined brand identities, product packaging, newspaper, magazine and billboard ads. The scale and breadth of these brand expressions allowed us to identify the major brand visual language trends of a broad range of market leaders for the last year.

Whilst the majority of the examples presented in this report are recent, many trends are not in themselves new. It is our interpretation of the groundswell of take-up of a trend and the influence exerted within their market by the brands involved, that leads us to define the most compelling and influential trends.

What is the value of a Trend Report into the code of brand visual language?

All brands project an image through their visual language. It is up to each brand to make conscious and informed decisions about exactly what they wish their visual language to communicate relative to the competition and to their market's perceptions. An understanding and mastery of the trends in brand visual language will allow business to 'tune' their brand's image to ensure they're consistently communicating the right messages to the right people.

For every organisation seeking to best manage their brand identity, these trends must be part of the consideration process. For each brand there will be advantages and disadvantages to leveraging the cues and meaning inherent in these trends. The big question you should be considering is this; 'does the trend provide an opportunity to leverage a set of visual cues to communicate the perfect brand messages to your market, or has the trend become so widely adopted as to compromise the uniqueness of the brands who follow it?'

MAJOR TREND:

**GLOBAL**

**BLANDING**

*Global 'Blanding' is the single greatest trend we've seen in brand identity over the past two years, and in the last 12 months we've seen nothing to suggest the trend is losing steam.*

These major trends are the most significant and most defining of the last year. Major trends typically cross-over multiple categories, industries and markets, becoming drivers of design in their own right, with scant regard for market relevance.

Global 'Blanding' is the homogenization of brand visual language that we have seen occurring in brand identity design. Like many trends, it was started by re-branding of some of the largest global brands including; Xerox, British Telecom, Barack Obama's Presidential Campaign, AT&T, Apple, Barclaycard, HP & Mastercard, before being picked-up by the second and third tiers of medium and small enterprises. This visual language trend cuts across almost every conceivable category from telecommunications to airlines to petroleum, to sporting teams and fast food.

Global 'Blanding' describes the trading-in of unique and usually meaningful symbolism for a shared and meaningless visual language of spheres, colour blends and transparencies, and three dimensional shapes. Whilst the visual style achieved by combining these elements provides a sense of 'international or globalization' often combined with a suggestion of 'cutting-edge technology', this is typically achieved at the expense of individuality, brand differentiation and brand messaging. There are so many examples of brand marks that fit this category, we can show you only a small selection. This is not only the strongest trend identified, but also the one we believe to contain the greatest risk of compromise to brand differentiation and uniqueness. Due to over-use and mass misuse this trend has the potential for inappropriate or confusing visual messaging.



## *THE AUTO BADGE HERITAGE*



The last few years has seen almost every auto manufacturer refine their brand mark to make it a shiny, three-dimensional representation of their badge. This trend has been enabled by the evolution of graphic rendering software and print technology which now allows complex brand mark rendering such as these to be reproduced faithfully.

As we've observed the trend of three-dimensionality sweep across the brand identity in so-many categories we wonder whether these auto brands can be held responsible for starting the trend, or at least giving it the momentum of credibility.



## *THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE*



The strongest of the global 'blanding' sub-trends is the Sphere of Influence. With clear global symbolism, many brands with international reach or aspirations have been attracted to a sphere-based brand mark.

This category includes the many brands from a wide range of categories and geographical markets who have evolved, refined or re-designed their brand identity to include a sphere element. Most brands have adopted

this trend to communicate a global positioning - which for many brands is a legitimate play. Some brands however seem to have 'gone along for the ride' and through lack of relevance, or poor execution don't fit in with the big boys. Brands attracted to the gravitational pull of the Sphere of Influence span property, telecommunications, travel, finance, hardware, retail, software, petroleum, gaming, politics and fast food.







## *EVERY MAN AND HIS DOG'S BREAKFAST*



Whilst consciously or inadvertently following a trend in brand visual language does not on its own diminish the effectiveness or value of an organisation's brand identity, a trend that groups together a mass of unrelated businesses and markets, painting them with the same brush should be carefully considered before being adopted. A key requirement of an effective brand identity is to provide the business with unique and own-able visual properties. The Global Blanding trend applies a templated approach of three dimensional shape and graduating colour to every imaginable brand and market. Whilst providing brand with a sense of currency, there can be no doubt this approach increases the extent to which brand

marks look similar to each other. Some brand that follow this trend do so whilst maintaining relevance and a uniqueness in their visual language relative to their market. The Woolworths brand identity below is a good example. However, other brands such as UPS, Packard Bell, Microsoft's Silverlight, Kraft Foods, and the Corowa RSL Club seem intent on following the leader rather than striking-out in their own unique and relevant direction.







## SHARING SHARDS

Another sub-trend gaining popularity is the translucent shard. First spotted in the IT space, this style of visual language has moved across the finance industry and business consulting to place branding for the City of Melbourne in Australia.



## THE NEW FACE OF WHICH SPORT?

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As sporting clubs around the world clamor for the latest update to their brand's visual language, many are turning to three dimensional versions of their existing symbols and mascots. New sporting clubs and organisations

aren't immune from the trend either. Here are three competitive sporting organisations from Australia who's brand identities follow this trend.



## THE FLYING GRID



Key-lines have been used to create a three dimensional form in brand marks for decades. Recent times has seen this form of rendering gain new momentum with the addition of blended colour to accentuate the

effect. These examples span brand identities from organizations in markets as diverse as insurance, travel, telecommunications and a place brand for a city in Victoria, Australia.



## *SAME-SAME BUT DIFFERENT*

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Was it Einstein who said “There is nothing that is a more certain sign of insanity than to do the same thing over and over and expect the result to be different.” It turns out Einstein’s theory of relativity seems also to hold for these three brand marks representing

businesses in the unrelated medical equipment, electromechanic and new media markets.



## THE RIBBON OF LIFE

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Ribbons have long been a symbol of life and celebration. The current trend of Global Blanding has seen the use of the ribbon element on brand identity increase noticeably - sometimes to good effect (the celebration of fresh food for Woolworths and the elegant

flight of British Airways), sometimes with little apparent relevance (the stiff ribbon 'V' of Vic Roads).



Storm Design & Brand DNA are one brand strategy and design agency with two names.

Brand DNA is the strategy arm of the agency, working with businesses across almost every conceivable market to define their brand's market positioning, reason for being and go-to-market proposition.

Storm is the design arm of the agency, working with those same clients to create the visual expression of every conceivable application of their brand from identity to signage, from retail spaces to on-line experiences, from packaging to corporate publications.

Together Storm and Brand DNA have more than 30 years experience working with businesses to position their brands for market leadership and success.

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