

True Colors: Using Color to Build Your Brand

When you hear “big blue,” what company do you think of?

Some companies, organizations and even people are so consistent and steadfast in their use of color, that they almost own that color in our minds. Think Home Depot, Breast Cancer Awareness, the Artist Formerly Known as Prince.

Some companies actually do own their colors. Tiffany, for example, has registered its trademark robin's egg blue as a brand asset.

As marketers, you know that color is an important brand asset. It helps clients and prospects recognize your company or product. But color can be used to support goals way beyond just recognition. It can be used to evoke emotion and build that all-important connection with the people who surround your brand.

You can use color to further differentiate your organization from your competitors, revitalize an aging product and engage and unite your employees, partners and customers. When you go beyond the traditional use of color, you can make incredible strides in achieving your goals.

When I worked for the software company Lotus, our color was yellow. Not just yellow—our yellow was a custom color called Lotus yellow.

This unique color was so important to Lotus that our Creative Director, Vartus—a strong brand herself—went to tremendous lengths to ensure that it was being used properly on everything from brochures to signage to coffee mugs.

Every print job cost extra because we had to add our custom color to the standard four-color process. But the cost was just a small investment in an incredibly powerful brand asset. The whole organization understood the importance of yellow and worked to ensure its abundant and appropriate use.

The Lotus corporate color was originally blue. But it changed to yellow when we moved our products into retail. Yellow boxes are more likely to be taken off the shelf, so Lotus Yellow was born. But it was not through retail sales that the yellow had its most dramatic effect. It was with the larger Lotus brand community.

Color Activates Your Brand Community

When I first joined the company, I was hit with yellow from all angles; it seemed a bit excessive. But when I went on my first qualitative brand audit, I saw first-hand how powerful color can be. Respondents in cities from San Francisco to Sao Paolo shouted “yellow” when asked, “When you think about Lotus, what first comes to mind.”

And yellow was consistent with our brand attributes: bright, positive, warm, visionary. Our yellow awareness was so powerful, that when we launched TV ads in a letterbox format (the ad was shown between two horizontal bars of yellow) people could identify that they came from Lotus without even watching them. Not bad for general brand awareness. Of course, we hoped people would watch the ads, too!

In the marketing department, we used yellow as a way to express the brand internally. We developed communications and Web-based materials that explained the Lotus brand through creative uses of yellow.

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Everyone in the company bought into Lotus yellow and proactively supported its liberal use. We even had a “yellow” video that was shown to all new hires during orientation.

From accounting to product development, employees considered how to include some yellow in their day-to-day activities. And business partners and alliances joined in, too. The color yellow, as strange as it seems, was a powerful and unifying force among all members of the Lotus brand community.

Color Choice Can't Be Taken Lightly

Choosing a color can be as challenging as it is important. There is a whole psychology behind color. And colors mean different things in different countries. Lotus yellow, for example, had a different formula in Japan than it did in the rest of the world. So choosing color for your organization or product is not something you do lightly.

Selecting a color to represent a person can be an even greater challenge according to Brian Wu, Partner and Design Director for Brandego, a company that builds Web portfolios for business people.

“When we build a Web site for an executive, one of the key decisions has to do with color,” he says. “What color or palette of colors will support the client's personal brand attributes and set an appropriate emotional tone—in the way that music colors movie titles?”

Do you know what color or color palette best represents your personal brand?

The most common logo color for American corporations is blue. But blue is probably more often associated with IBM than any other brand. And IBM takes full advantage of its unique relationship with blue. You will see blue on the corporate Web site, in all presentations, on corporate materials, on signage and in the names of many of their programs: Blue Gene, Deep Blue and Extreme Blue (just to name a few).

While IBM is associated with the most common corporate color, UPS has chosen one of the least-used colors (brown) and turned it into a tremendous brand asset. Its Valentines Delivery press release was titled “Roses are Brown.” In its latest series of ads, it replaced the corporate name with “brown” in the tag line: “What can brown do for you?”

According to color expert Jacqui Howard Bear, brown represents steadfastness, simplicity, friendliness and dependability—perfect for a logistics company. These brand attributes are closely connected with the UPS brand promise. Brown is also a highly differentiated color. Can you think of another organization that uses brown?

Color supports differentiation

The ability to identify a company by its brand color is amazing. When you are standing at the bus stop at the airport waiting for your rental car shuttle, you know whether you are looking for the yellow, red or green bus. It's more difficult to identify Budget (orange and blue) and Alamo (yellow and blue). Multiple colors seem to be harder to own—unless, of course, you're Apple.

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The rainbow colors are perfect for the Apple brand. Creative. Different. Diverse. Not an inexpensive proposition from a printing perspective, but extremely valuable from a branding angle.

Color Can Have A Double Effect

Some organizations and products have colorful names: Orange (the European telecommunications company), jetBlue, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, the Red Cross, the Yellow Pages, Blue Cross and Blue Shield. They all benefit doubly from the emotion-creating power of color.

And the music industry seems to have a strong desire to connect sound with color: the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Pink, Green Day, Deep Purple, Simply Red, and the Indigo Girls are just a few of the artists with colorful names.

Although blue is the most popular corporate color in the US, red seems to win out when it comes to company names that include color. Red Herring, the Red Cross, Red Envelope and Red Hat Software are just a few of the companies that chose to associate themselves with this color, which often connotes warmth, excitement and aggressiveness.

Color Supports a Renaissance

M&M-Mars certainly knows the value of color. It revitalized a brand that was at the end of its product life cycle by holding a contest to find the next M&M color. It turned out to be blue, and they launched an extremely successful ad campaign where the other M&Ms, who were jealous of the new blue, would hold their breath so that they too would turn blue.

That was so successful for M&Ms-Mars, that it has continued to use color as a way to generate more interest in the brand. In 1992, it held another contest to choose a color. Now M&Ms have lost their color entirely. They are black and white, and so is their packaging. We as consumers can help find their colors again as part of the "Help Find Our Colors" contest.

The potential that color has to unite your organization and support your brand-building activities is tremendous. There is almost no end to the creative ways that it can be used to attain your goals. So think about whether you are getting the maximum value from your corporate color and if necessary, make a plan to color your brand.

Here are 10 ways to make the most of color. Color is powerful. It evokes emotion. It is an important brand tool, so use it wisely. To make the most of your color, ensure that it...

1. Supports your brand attributes.
2. Is relevant to your target audience.
3. Is always the same shade and hue.
4. Is visible to all members of your brand community, inside and outside the company.
5. Is understood and appropriately used by all employees.
6. Is featured on all your communications materials and sales tools.
7. Is different from your competitors' colors.
8. Works in all parts of the world where you plan to do business.
9. Is applied to more than just your logo.
10. Comes with guidelines on its use for partners and affiliates.

Written by Pantone
