

## Color, brands and identity

In London, they brought the fluid neon colors back. For more than 50 years, the moving, illuminated electronic liquid of Lucozade, an energy drink, inspired motorists driving above down-at-heel Brentford, as they reached the western approaches of Britain's capital at night. Then, in 2004, the local council demanded that the ageing red bottle endlessly pouring golden goodness into a glass be demolished, despite local protests. But in 2010 the product's makers, GlaxoSmithKline, built a new and exact replica of the original sign and mounted it just 200 meters away.<sup>1</sup>

### How corporate and product colors will infiltrate public space even more

With Lucozade the brand, the sign and its colors were a widely loved urban monument. And whatever the intensity problems with the new, dear, long-life but low-energy light emitting diodes (LEDs) that are coming into general interior use, we can be sure that, over the next 10 years, the exteriors of the world's big buildings will brightly shine brands in gigantic colors, with moving lights, in amazing new ways. One does not need to term these works *kinetic sculptures*, as some do. The point is simple: developments in architectural engineering, height and form, when melded with progress in displays, will conspire to make facades into cinemas for the colorful brand.

In Pudong, Shanghai's financial district, the vertical corners of buildings already boast blue lights that run up and down 70 stories or more, making edifices fairly throb with energy at night. Already, too, one whole side of a skyscraper plays videoclips over the Huangpu River. So it will not be long before such large-scale tricks make corporate colors into urban icons all over the world. In 1970, following a visit to Tokyo four years earlier, France's Roland Barthes published his personal interpretation of Japan: *Empire of Signs*. Forty years later, the electronic urban logo is a large, dynamic spectacle and emphatic corporate or product identifier that's coming to your city wherever you are. What's more, its colors will be more precise than ever.

### How colors affect our recognition of and preference for certain brands

With Lucozade the red and yellow in the sign directly copy the colors of the product's distinctive packaging. But there is something interesting about this mix of colors. Red and yellow were for decades the colors of two other, more universal urban landmarks – McDonald's, and Shell.

As is suggested with Lucozade, red and yellow together can well connote things that are essential to travel in and between cities: fuel, energy. Figuratively, these are what McDonald's provides, and Shell provides them literally.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian Mason, 'Lucozade to unveil its new neon sign by the M4 after six-year absence', *This is local London*, 15 February 2010, on [http://www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/whereilive/southwest/hounslow/5008320.Brentford\\_welcomes\\_back\\_giant\\_neon\\_sign/](http://www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/whereilive/southwest/hounslow/5008320.Brentford_welcomes_back_giant_neon_sign/)

Some maintain that McDonald's may have benefited from the fact that red stimulates the adrenaline glands in the brain, or that red and yellow are the first two colors the eye processes and sends to the brain. Yet the similarity of the colors in Lucozade, McDonald's and Shell suggests that color in branding is more about repeatedly and consistently being distinctive – about standing out, especially in poorer, grittier, greyer districts such as Brentford – than it is about differentiation against other brands. Indeed, distinguished Australian academics, studying soft drinks brands in the UK and banking brands in Australia, have come to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

The financial and color clout wielded by large corporate brands may homogenise cities, as environmentalists often charge.<sup>3</sup> But we may also conclude that in complex urban settings, and perhaps especially in the Third World, endlessly familiar corporate colors reassure, suggest modernity and relative safety, work as geographical landmarks, and invite brand loyalty.

### **How companies choose and claim their identifying colors**

Interestingly enough, both McDonald's and Shell have recently changed what professionals sometimes term their Retail Visual Identity. In the case of McDonald's, there has in Europe been a shift toward a literal translation of 'Green'. In the case of Shell in the US, pectens on canopies have been stripped of the word 'Shell'. Here the Australian academics are confirmed in an additional point they make – that color alone 'can replace the brand in some circumstances, or extend the branding quality of any communications beyond simply mentioning or showing the brand name'.<sup>4</sup>

In Europe late in 2009, McDonald's replaced its traditional red for a 'deep hunter green' in hundreds of stores. The intention was to 'clarify', as McDonald's Germany vice chairman Hoger Beekof put it, the company's 'responsibility for the preservation of natural resources. In the future we will put an even larger focus on that'.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly corporate colors are the subject of much deliberation. At Cold War's end, for example, both Exxon and Gulf, BP's US subsidiary, used the graphic design titan Saul Bass, no less, to overhaul their filling stations.<sup>6</sup> Now Shell in the US is prepared

---

2 Jenni Romaniuk, Byron Sharp and Andrew Ehrenberg, 'Evidence concerning the importance of perceived brand differentiation', *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 15 (2) 2007, on <http://members.byronsharp.com/different.pdf>

3 See for example Molly Conisbee et al, *Clone town Britain: the loss of local identity on the nation's high streets*, New Economics Foundation (NEF), 28 August 2004, on [www.neweconomics.org/gen/z\\_sys\\_PublicationDetail.aspx?PID=189](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_PublicationDetail.aspx?PID=189). For an update, see Andrew Simms, Petra Kjell and Ruth Potts, *Clone town Britain: the survey results on the bland state of the nation*, 6 June 2005, NEF, on [www.neweconomics.org/gen/z\\_sys\\_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=206](http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=206)

4 Romaniuk and others, op cit, p51.

5 'Color McDonald's Green', *NACSONline*, 25 November 2009, on <http://www.nacsonline.com/NACS/News/Daily/Pages/ND1125093.aspx>

6 James Woudhuysen, 'Bass profundo', *Design Week*, 22 September 1989, on <http://www.woudhuysen.com/index.php/main/article/272>

for its colorful logo alone to do much of the work of branding, assisted only by some extra white, and a nighttime halo.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps this attempt to be less obviously commercial marks a belated concession to Naomi Klein's critique of 'brand bullies'.<sup>8</sup> Cutting costs, however, seems a more important motivation.<sup>9</sup>

What is really striking about the colors of brands, both in cityscapes and elsewhere, is how the firms responsible for them say little about how they were chosen, but frequently engage in very public legal controversies to claim them as their own.<sup>10</sup>

In signs, canopies and general outdoor advertising, color appears to be mute, yet in fact speaks volumes.

---

7 'USA: Shell RVie Identity Unveiled', *PetrolWorld*, 22 September 2009, on <http://www.petrolworld.com/world-headlines/usa-shell-rvie-identity-unveiled.html>

8 Naomi Klein, *No logo: taking aim at the brand bullies*, Flamingo/HarperCollins, 2000. For a critique, see Mick Hume, "'No Logo" – ten years on', *The Times*, 16 January 2010, on [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/book\\_reviews/article6988405.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_reviews/article6988405.ece)

9 'USA: Shell RVie Identity Unveiled', op cit.

10 See for example IP Media Centre [Australia], 'Battle Royal over the Colour Purple', 24 October 2008, on [http://www.ipaustralia.gov.au/media/pages/lead/cadbury\\_purple.htm](http://www.ipaustralia.gov.au/media/pages/lead/cadbury_purple.htm)