

What Logos Bring to Mind

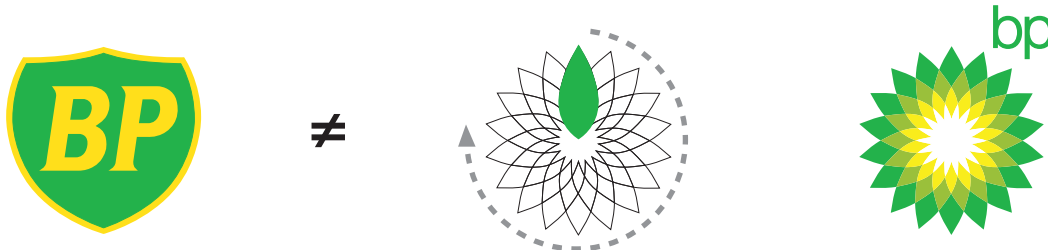
Abstraction and Minimalism have been co-opted by corporate identity design. These fine art movements have been repurposed and put towards *more useful*, commercial ends. Identity creation lets companies invent and project ideal, lionized images of themselves. Company logos are created through abstraction, and Minimalism is the defining aesthetic of these corporate logos.

Even in naming brands, abstraction is an effective tool. In 1988, Philip Morris purchased Kraft Foods for six times its stock value. The surplus Philip Morris paid for this \$12.9 billion-dollar costume change was justified by the “brand essence,” or idea, of Kraft Foods. By expanding from cigarettes to family-friendly foods, Philip Morris upgraded its brand affiliation, diversified its portfolio, and obfuscated its core tobacco business. Several years later the merged corporation renamed itself Altria.¹ This brand name shift from Philip Morris to Altria is paralleled by the Minimalist, abstract new parent company logo:



British Petroleum also underwent spasmodic contortions to reinvent itself. Until 2001, British Petroleum’s logo was an imperialist shield. After several oil company acquisitions and the 1998 purchase of Amoco, BP Amoco repositioned itself as an environmentally aware oil company. It did so via an ingenious head-to-toe rebranding. To start, the corporation took its long-standing, identifiable initialism, “BP,” and changed the acronym’s *meaning*. The old “BP,” which meant British Petroleum, is now “bp,” and means “beyond petroleum.”

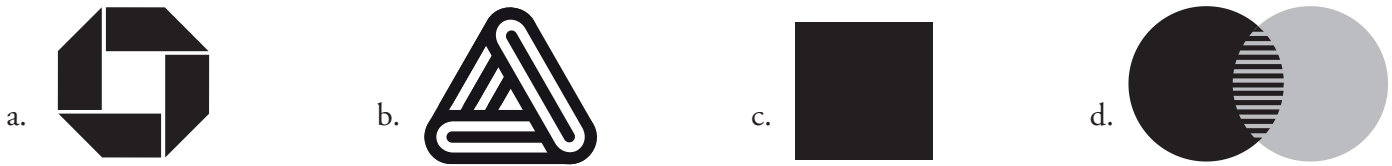
BP’s renaming, by sleight of hand akin to a magic trick, is only half the story. To create bp’s logo, a leaf is rotated 18 times around its bottom point. The leaves’ intersection create a chrysanthemum-like form, generating greenness out from its core. Bursting with natural references (leaf, flower, lotus, star, sun), this brilliant logo radiates solar-powered, environmental friendliness.



That BP could reinvent itself, and retain its nickname while changing its meaning, belies a lack of interdependence between a company’s image and what the company actually produces. It’s true: there is often no correlation between a corporation’s logo and its product. A logo’s job is to “spin” the corporation and sell it in visual shorthand. For good and bad, logos make companies appear to be better, and other, than what they are. Logos are a form of commercialized abstract art.

Minimalist art is known for its purity of form. It is stripped of ornamentation and reduced to its simplest elements. By this yardstick, logos may fall short of being truly “Minimal.” Unlike Minimalist visual art, logos are always in color. Color sells. Logos are also decorative icons which refer to something else, a company, and neither decoration nor reference is part of the Minimalist tradition.

But logos and Minimalist art borrow from the same set of tools. Logos must communicate instantly. Minimalism's simple, clean lines are perfect for this task. A logo "works" because it transmits a specific idea using a minimum of information. Where Minimalist art exalts form for its own sake, logos use form towards efficient, directed communication. Both logos and Minimalist art convey power, authority, impenetrability, and machine-fabricated perfection. In some cases, logos and Minimalist art evoke a sense of Euclidean geometry, as though they were pre-existing, or conjured out of a void.



As legendary Minimalist architect Mies Van der Rohe would say, "Less is more." This tenet is a common denominator of Minimalist art and corporate logo design.

What works for the parent, however, doesn't necessarily work for the child. Large corporations may benefit from macho, Minimalist logos. But some smaller brands, often owned by larger corporations, tend to compete on cuteness. In the grocery store, for instance, brands get friendly. Here are some examples from Kraft:



Minimalism has no place here. The icon-logo strategy is gone, replaced by customized, edible-looking type spelling out brand names. The trustworthy Kraft logotype, making an occasional appearance as a parental chaperone might at a middle school dance, is scaled way back. Twisting type, eye-popping graphics and 3D effects are all flashing trademark bling. These products don't give a rip about moderation. Their jazz leaves Minimalism in the dirt.

Abstraction, though, is hugely important in dreaming up food brands. These are arguably disgusting processed foods. Even if you like them, you probably don't know what's in them. Food branding encourages a conceptual disconnect to take place, in which highly imaginative names and graphics foil consumers into purchasing the products, without regard to the actual contents. The graphics are so cool, and it looks so good, it's hard to think or care about the contents. This is brand seduction through abstraction, but not through Minimalism.

¹ On March 30, 2007 Altria Group will spin off Kraft General Foods. Altria will be the new name of the Philip Morris Companies: Philip Morris International, Philip Morris USA and Philip Morris Capital Corporation. In addition, Altria has a 28.6% economic and voting interest in SABMiller.