

# A back-to-basics approach to logos

*Logo design without the bells and whistles*

By Dan Antonelli

When I first began designing logos, I had a tendency to throw as many special effects or lettering effects into them, sometimes just because I could. I think I was trying to push as much stuff into a design as possible. At the time, my clients seemed okay with that. Bevels, prismatic lettering (hey, it even spurred the creation of a few fonts that

I did for SignDNA!), airbrushing, etc. And color? The more the better! Maybe I was trying too hard to prove something.

But as I honed my skills as a designer, the more important question about logo design and all sorts of lettering effects became, "Should I use them?"

One of the most critical aspects of refining



This very simple graphic with the logo is converted easily to one color. The houses can be interpreted as arrows as well. One important consideration was how would the logo fit on a 24-by-24 real estate sign. I designed it for square format instead of horizontal so that it would fit well. It's helpful to know the primary usage for the logo beforehand (i.e., truck lettering) so that the design can best fit the canvas. Slight font tweaking on initial caps helps create recognizable elements.



Here's a green guy thinking the word *Think*. Colors give viewer idea of business type, and the simple *Think* bubble helps tie the graphic to the name. The overall objective of this design was to make the company look bigger and more franchise-like. The client originally hired an Internet firm for the logo. The result was frightening. But like everything else, you get what you pay for.



So you sell and install pavers. Let's integrate some simple paving stones into the design. It's simple, to the point, and clearly identifies the nature of their business. The Eras type family was used here.

your skills as a designer is to dissect past work and examine its effectiveness. Did the logo meet the client's objectives establishing a brand and a recognizable identity? Did it give the viewer an indication of the type of business they run, etc.? Or was it more of a crutch for the designer's ego?

We've all been at the point where we give clients what they want instead of what they need. Sometimes that means the design does not meet the strategic marketing objectives of a good logo. As designers, we can argue that it meets our strategic objectives of completing the design, making the client happy, and getting paid as quickly and painlessly as possible.

**The designer's responsibility** But are we doing our job if we don't explain why *a* is better than *b*? My rate for logo-design pricing keeps escalating, and part of what clients pay me for is my expertise on the subject. They trust me to design an appropriate image to represent their business. As a designer, it's my responsibility to sell them a logo that is what their business needs first—and what they like (hopefully), second. Of course, I want to know beforehand what their tastes might be and I try and figure that into the equation. But if their tastes run contrary to what I think will work for their business, I'll explain my position before we start.

Some people let you run with it and trust you completely. Let's face it, they must trust me a lot even before they hire me when there are so many Internet logo mills churning out logos at a fraction of the cost of mine. But my goal is not to just sell a logo. I want to sell an identity that will grow the client's business. There's a big difference in what I provide. Some realize it, and hire me. Others go elsewhere and spend substantially less, and usually get substantially less in the process.

So when it comes to throwing the kitchen sink into the design, you need to really examine the needs of the client and whether all those bells and whistles are really necessary.

**Are our clients maturing, or are we?** Not long ago, I mentioned simplicity in designs to my friend Bert Quimby [Bert Graphix, Oak Ridge, New Jersey]. We talked about the trend towards simpler designs and what the reasons for it might be. "The reality is that many of these customers first came to me in their early 20s," says Bert. "They were into the flash thing. You keep lettering their trucks for ten years, and they realize that perhaps they don't need the flash. They opt for a simpler design that makes them look bigger—less like a small business."

I also think that initially some of these folks



Here we added a small effect—a beveled edge to the lettering—but kept it understated. By creating the bevel as a greyscale tiff, this still prints two color. Integration of the O with the other letters provides a recognizable element to an otherwise basic design. The overlapping adds some depth as well.



Note the typeface for *First Class* has a sort of early 20s feel, and so does the graphic. This event- and party-planning firm does some business in New York City, so the building graphic worked extremely well. I used *Bodoni Italic* for the secondary copy.



A simple graphic for a retail operation with 20 locations. They wanted to look more like the bigger vision-care companies. Colors are off the beaten path a bit, too, which can make a design easier to remember. And for those of you keeping track, yes, I've warned of the perils of Helvetica usage in the past. But I'm starting to really like the Helvetica Neue family!



This staffing company wanted to present a well-established, upper-echelon image, since they primarily place people in vice-president and above position. The script has an old-style appeal, and provides a nice, recognizable element to the design.



More Helvetica Neue! This time the light version gives a modern, clean look for this accountant. The simple graphic formed with the letters provided a backdrop for their stationery package. Minor font tweaks on the *A* provide a little more visual interest without being overdone.



What do you do for the attorneys? It's an age-old question. Use the gavel? The Scales of Justice? Been there, done that. Instead, we got a little playful take on the ampersand, some horizontal rules for cohesiveness, and classic *Futura Extra Bold* for the secondary copy. Main copy face is Adobe's *Trajan Bold*.



This logo for another sign company uses a simple sign graphic to help illustrate their business. The word *graphics* can mean so many things, so we decided to add the positioning line to help clarify the nature of their business.



More Helvetica! This logo for another staffing company helps illustrate the diverse staffing solutions they provide for employers. The simple graphic, done in shades of PMS colors, helps carry the message. It reinforces the positioning line, which we also wrote. Secondary copy is Helvetica Neue.

were trying to outdo their competition, or take it one level past their competitor. But as they get established, they realize that doing that for ego's sake is neither a sound nor practical rational approach to their marketing and advertising.

But the other reality is that there's more push for simpler graphics and a more corporate look to logos. Perhaps that's because we are getting older. We've done the airbrush thing or prismatic thing to death. What really requires more talent and skill as a designer is to create a simple one- or two-color design that says what the business does in the most basic and simple way possible. Now *that's* hard.

Here's a sample of some of my recent logo projects, and some rationale for the designs as well. All are two-color designs. \*SC



Dan Antonelli owns Graphic D-Signs, Inc., a Washington, New Jersey, based design firm that provides Web, print and vehicle advertising solutions for small businesses, including sign companies. You can e-mail him at [dan@graphicd-signs.com](mailto:dan@graphicd-signs.com) or visit his

Web site at [www.graphicd-signs.com](http://www.graphicd-signs.com).

Dan's book, *Logo Design for Small Business*, is available from *SignCraft*, P.O. Box 60031, Ft. Myers, FL 33906, for \$25 plus \$6 shipping and handling.

More examples and case studies can be seen on [www.graphicd-signs.com](http://www.graphicd-signs.com). Click on Portfolio > Case Studies to see more!

## There's more on [www.signcraft.com](http://www.signcraft.com)

Click on *Features* to read Dan's article:

- **Create an affordable, full-color brochure for your shop,**  
November/December 1998
- **Creative digital printing can set your shop apart,**  
July/August 2002
- and several more of Dan's past articles



For this store that rents party supplies and equipment, I used a simple graphic that helps carry the playful nature of the Mike Stevens letter style [available from *SignCraft*]. At a glance, you can look at this logo and know exactly what they do. Designed mainly for increased distance legibility for the vehicles (vans and box trucks), this logo also converts well to one-color usage.



This is a company in the business of people. A simple icon that represents that concept was developed. The icon was something we built on when designing their stationery, brochure and Web site. It's nice to drive a campaign around a cool little icon. We also wrote the positioning line *Leaders in Staffing*, which compliments the icon and symbolism of the outstretched "winners" arms.