The incredible evolution and history of logo design

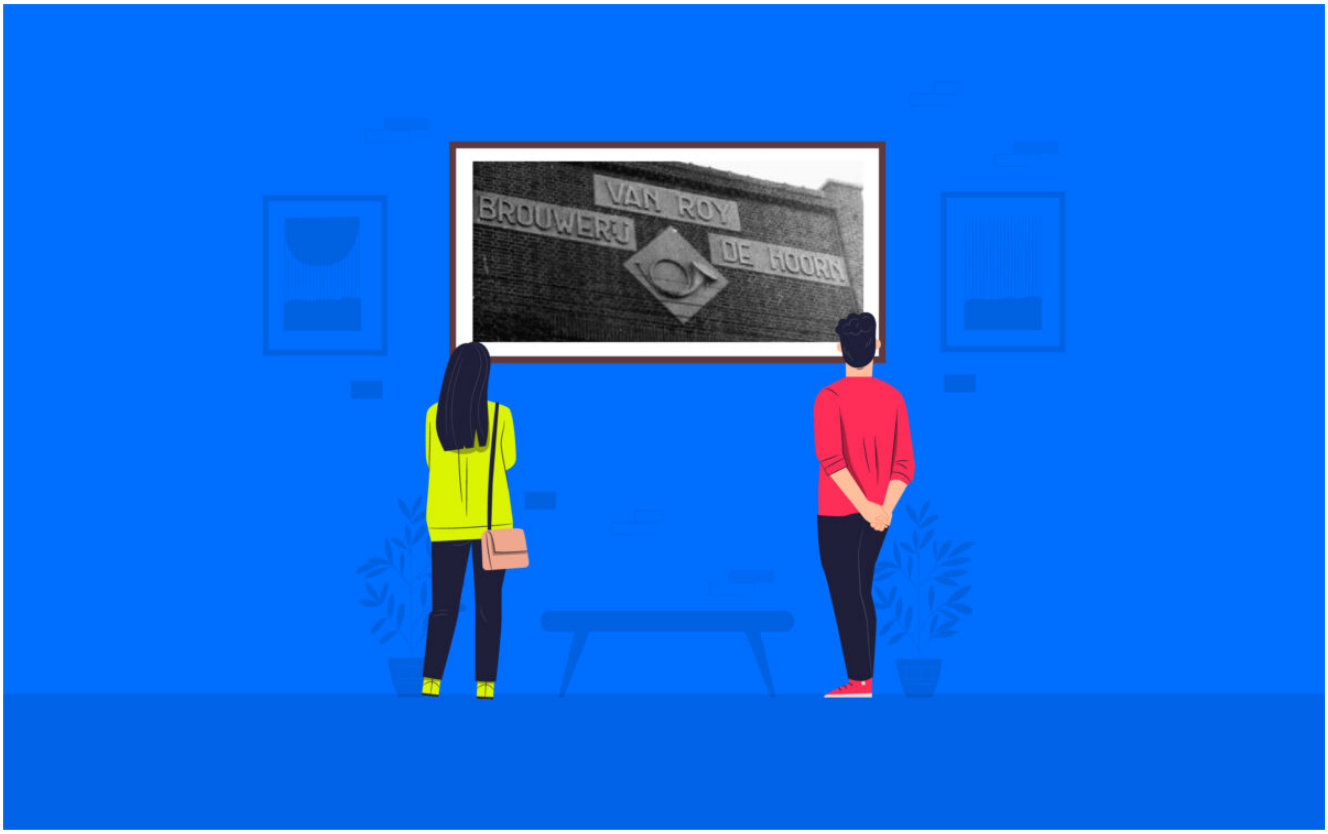
Category: Identity
written by Stewart Hodgson | 14 August 2023
The history of logo design dates back much further than many people realize. It's easy to assume that logos are a relatively new concept, dreamed up for a visual era, where people are constantly bombarded with symbolism designed to elicit certain emotions and drive transactions.

However, the reality is symbols have long been an important part of how we communicate as human beings. The human brain loves visuals, processing pictures 60,000 times faster than text. What's more, 90% of the information transmitted to the brain is visual.

When we consider these facts, it's easy to see why logo design, as a broad concept, dates back much farther than concepts like branding or marketing. Long before Nike found its swoosh, or McDonalds embraced the golden arches, the components of logo design influenced human history.

Today, we're going to take you on a journey through the history of logo design, tracing all the way back to the very first "official" logo.

Let's dive in.



What was the first ever logo? The oldest logo in the world today

If you're interested in the history of logo design, there's a good chance you want to know what the first ever logo actually was. Unfortunately, it's difficult to answer this question cohesively. The answer really depends on how you define an official logo.

Long before global marketing campaigns and social media, logos have been prominent around the world. Over time, as consumers and businesses have changed, logo design concepts have evolved.

If we look at a logo simply as a symbol used to identify a business, one of the "oldest" logos in the world today is probably the Stella Artois symbol. The origins of this global beer brand can be traced all the way back to 1366, to the Belgium Den Hoorn brewery.

A local brewer and entrepreneur named Sebastian Artois acquired the brewery much later in 1708, and named it after his second name. The word “Stella”, meaning “Star” in Latin was only added much later, in the 1900s.

Despite numerous changes to the company and its title over the years, the company has almost consistently used a horn in its logo, intended to attract customers worldwide.

Alternatively, if you define a logo as a trademarked brand image, the first logo may actually belong to a different brewery. The Bass Brewery trademarked its red triangle in 1876. This started something of a trend in the branding landscape, as companies began to discover the value of protecting their assets.



When were logos created? Ancient beginnings

Some of the earliest logos in history weren’t anything close

to the images you see today.

While official logos and trademarks were only established a few centuries ago, the history of logo design dates back much further. If we travel through time, between 70,000 and 7,000 BC, people around the world were already laying the foundations for graphic design.

Human beings drew animals and other images in caves, as warnings to other dwellers, and to tell stories. By 8,000 BC, this practice evolved into the world of pottery. People across Persia, Media, Assyria, Egypt, and many other regions created items communicating different ideas.

Pots and plates were adorned with images, intended to communicate aesthetic, cultural, ethical, and socio-political concepts. Though these images weren't official logos, they demonstrate that even in the earliest stretches of history, people were already representing ideas in symbols.

Nowhere was this concept more apparent than among the ancient Egyptians, known for developing hieroglyphics, one of the first formal writing systems.

While the Egyptians used the graphic symbols of hieroglyphics to represent words and sounds, they also created far more complex artistic pieces. Various images and colors in these images had specific meanings, representing one of the earliest examples of shape and color psychology.

Eventually, the Egyptians introduced another aspect used in modern logo design, incorporating grids in their design to set fixed standards for drawings. Today, grids help designers create the perfect logo, by setting proportions and ratios for consistent reproduction.

The Egyptians weren't the only culture to use images as symbols. The concept of logos began to appear in ancient China too, where people began developing characters to represent

ideas. Even the Ancient Greeks had their own script, known as “Linear B”.

This script consisted of more than 100 ideographic signs, and 87 syllabic signs for different commodities and objects. Even the word “logotype”, comes from the Greek “logos”, which means word or speech, and “tupos” which means mark.



Logo design history: Heraldic symbols

Jumping forward in history a little, to the medieval period, visual languages continued to appear in the form of symbolic signage and heraldic crests. During the middle ages, noble families began identifying themselves with heraldic crests and coats of arms.

Some of components of these crests still appear in various logos today, particularly in the academic world. Heraldry became extremely popular among Medieval Europe, with various

heraldic designs appearing on banners, shields, and more.

Colors and shapes were used to represent specific noble families, similar to how graphic artists use shapes and colors to represent the history and values of businesses today. Some shields and banners even helped to make some families more popular or respected in their communities.

Outside of the aristocracy at this time, much of the population was illiterate. During the high middle ages, the population began to grow, and cities began to form. Society began moving into the world of diversified trade, and shops began to emerge.

At this time, business owners and tradespeople began hanging signs to represent the goods or services they provided, just like an effective logo today.

In 1389, historical logo design evolved again, as King Richard II in England passed a law requiring breweries to display a sign outside of their buildings. This was seen as a safety measure, ensuring everyone had access to ale when water wasn't always safe to drink.

Some breweries, like Stella Artois, were already ahead of the trend, using symbols like horns to identify themselves to the public. While the images used at the beginning of logo history weren't as specific as the ones we see today, they were a good starting point.



Logo design evolution: The rise of new technology

The history of logo design leaped forward again in 105 AD, after paper making strategies began emerging in China. Although, it wasn't until 1276 AD that paper became available in Italy, and began being traded throughout Europe.

In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg changed the history of logos forever, by inventing the printing press. This meant printed materials showcasing iconic images and symbols became more common. The stage was set for modern logo design, as printers claimed ownership of their work.

By the end of the 15th century, various printers were using logos to separate their materials and content from those produced by other vendors. This is similar to how different symbols are used in the advertising industry today, to define and differentiate brands.

With the rise of printing came a wider variety of printed works. In the mid-1600s, the first printed newspaper appeared, and began circulating around the population.

These newspapers became popular, and companies began paying for advertisements to appear in the pages, showcasing their own logos and marks. Print gave businesses a new reason to set themselves apart from the competition and capture the attention of customers.

Since marketing materials were limited at the time, many of the initial logos used in the printing landscape were more complex. Companies packed their logos and labels with decoration and unique design elements, to ensure they stood out on the page.



Historical logo design: The beginning of branding

The industrial revolution pushed the world of branding and

logo design forward again. In the 19th century, various new technologies were created, paving the way for the factories and engines that would propel us into the modern world.

In the 1800s, changes to the structure of the printing press enabled the mass production of printed materials. Steam power changed the way items were produced, and Chromolithography allowed us to move beyond the black and white colors of previous solutions.

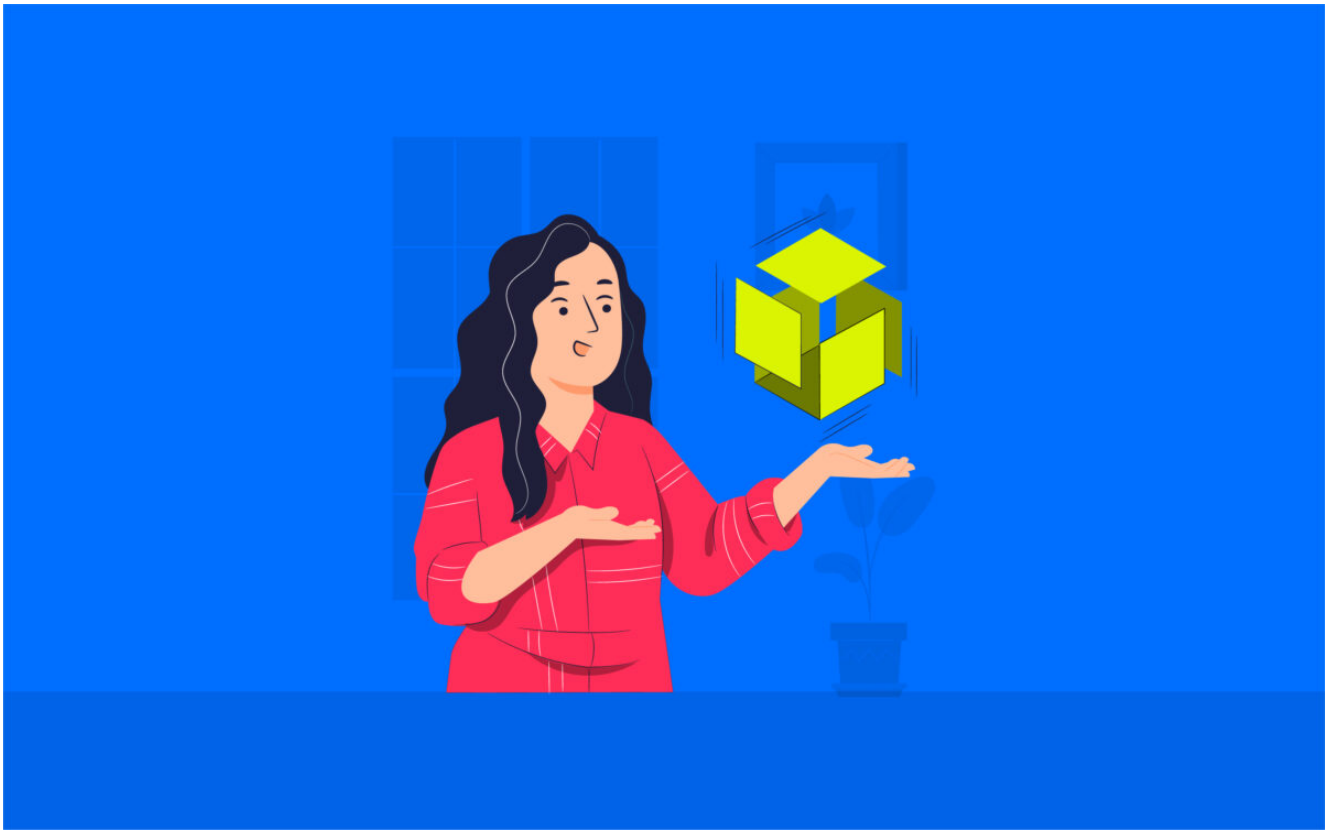
Mass color printing emerged in the United States for the first time in 1840, taking the origins of the logo to the next level. Colorful printed labels, posters, and advertisements became increasingly common, and branding started to evolve in earnest.

The rise of the Industrial Revolution also came with the introduction of the middle class. People outside of the nobility in the Victorian era suddenly had disposable income. This led to an increase in urban centers and retail locations.

As businesses began to establish themselves and search for ways to get their company name in front of customers, branding became increasingly important.

Frank Mason Robinson designed the very first Coca-Cola logo in 1885, launching a new age of logo design in the process. Today, the Coca-Cola logo remains one of the most recognized symbols in the world, despite having changed a few times over the years.

In 1910, different types of logos evolved throughout the United States and Europe. By 1914, groups outside of the commercial world had begun experimenting with visual identity. Pierre De Coubertin created the Olympic flag, which still appears within the games today.



The history of logos: Modern creativity

As technological advancements continued to emerge in the modern world, companies found new ways of reaching and connecting with potential customers. In 1956, Paul Rand designed the iconic IBM logo featuring a bee and a human eye: the first abstract logo.

The 1950s built on the creativity of the early 1900s, introducing a shift in the way people thought about logo design. Companies began to realize how impactful symbols could be, and brands started moving away from basic monochrome logo designs and coat of arms images.

During the 1960s, thought leaders in the London graphic design scene founded the Design and Art Direction initiative. Emblems in the modern world became more complex, particularly in the 60s, when A. Michael Noll and Charles Csuri created some of the first computer art.

1977 was another major year for logo designers. Milton Glaser created the iconic “I heart NY” pictogram for the New York State Department of Commerce. In the same year, the NHTSA designed the “Star of Life” logo, seen on virtually every EMS vehicle.

By the time we reached the late 20th century, every business wanted its own logo. Companies knew, by then, that if they wanted customers to remember them, they needed a simple mark, capable of differentiating them from their competitors.



The history of logo design: Digital revolution

Since the late 20th century, the history of logo design has continued to move forward in leaps and bounds, thanks largely to new technology. Computer-generated imagery (CGI), and Computer-Aided Drawing technologies became more common.

By the 1990s, human beings had created the personal computer,

and in the early 2000s, innovators like Adobe started developing graphic design tools like Photoshop and InDesign. This gave companies more freedom to create different forms of logo.

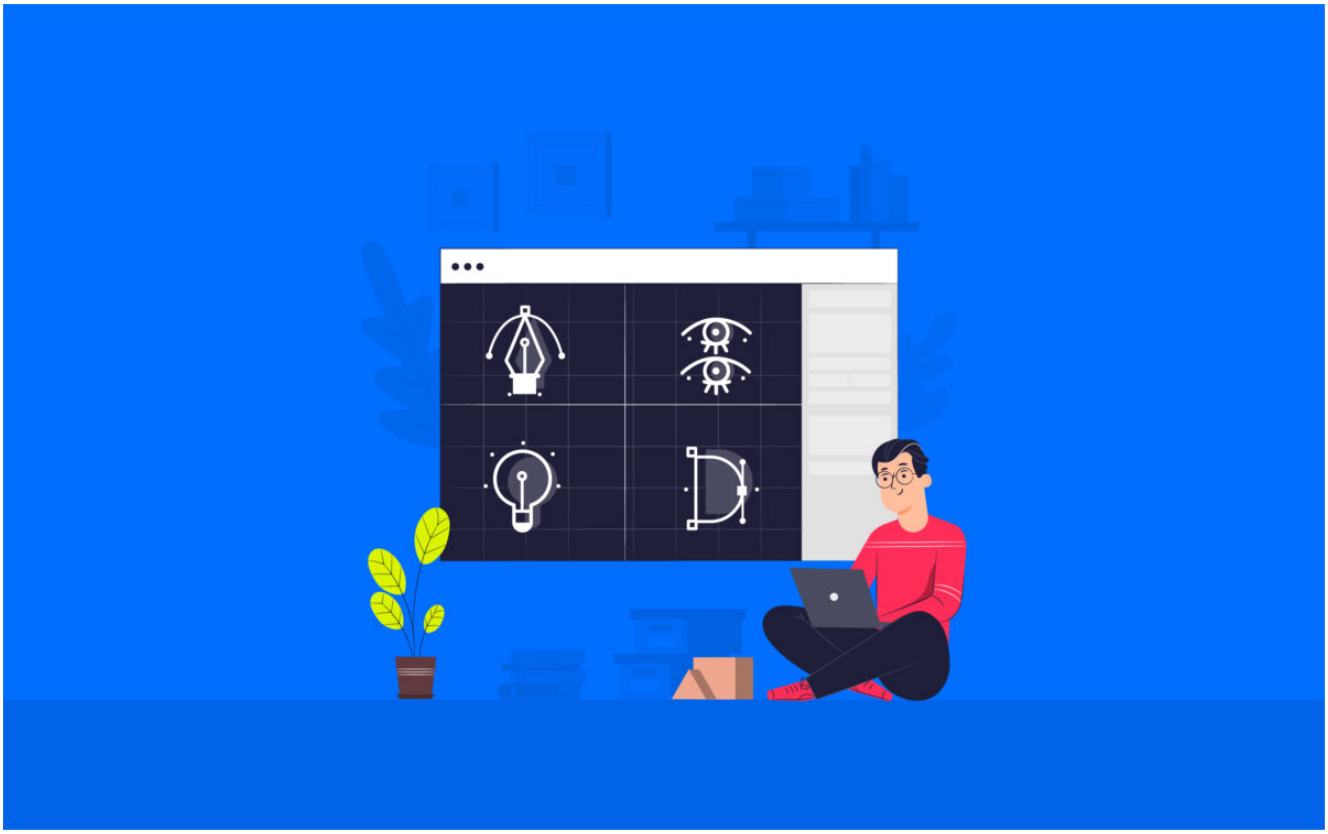
Society changed drastically with the digital era, and consumerism took on a different meaning. People began to see more media on screens, and designers got more creative with their logos. Brand marks became more innovative and dynamic.

For instance, MTV created an ever-changing logo to highlight the diversity of the brand. The logo was animated to reinforce the unique message of the company, taking advantage of new technology.

During the early origins of the logo in the internet world, designers attempted to help people adapt to new technology using “skeuomorphism”. Simply put, they tried to make early logos on screen look like the things we’d see off-screen.

Gradients, drop shadows, and digital textures were used to give the design of logos more depth. In the early 2000s, when Web 2.0 emerged, the design elements of logos changed again. Bright colors and rounded letters became more common.

As consumers became more comfortable with the paradigm shift to the digital world, flat design became more common, and minimalistic logos emerged.



Looking to the new era of logo design

The rise of minimalism appeared to some to be a backwards step in graphic design. Stylistic elements like textures and shadows became obsolete, and companies started creating more refined images. The age of the “modern logo” appeared, with a focus on simplicity.

Since then, logo design evolution has continued. Brands have begun to embrace creativity and adaptability in their logos again, constantly updating their image. Some famous logos have been refreshed and updated dozens of times in just the past few years.

Concepts like rebranding and refreshing logos have become more common, as the world continues to move at a break-neck pace. Brand identity is thriving, and organizations are far more invested in building and retaining the right visual image.

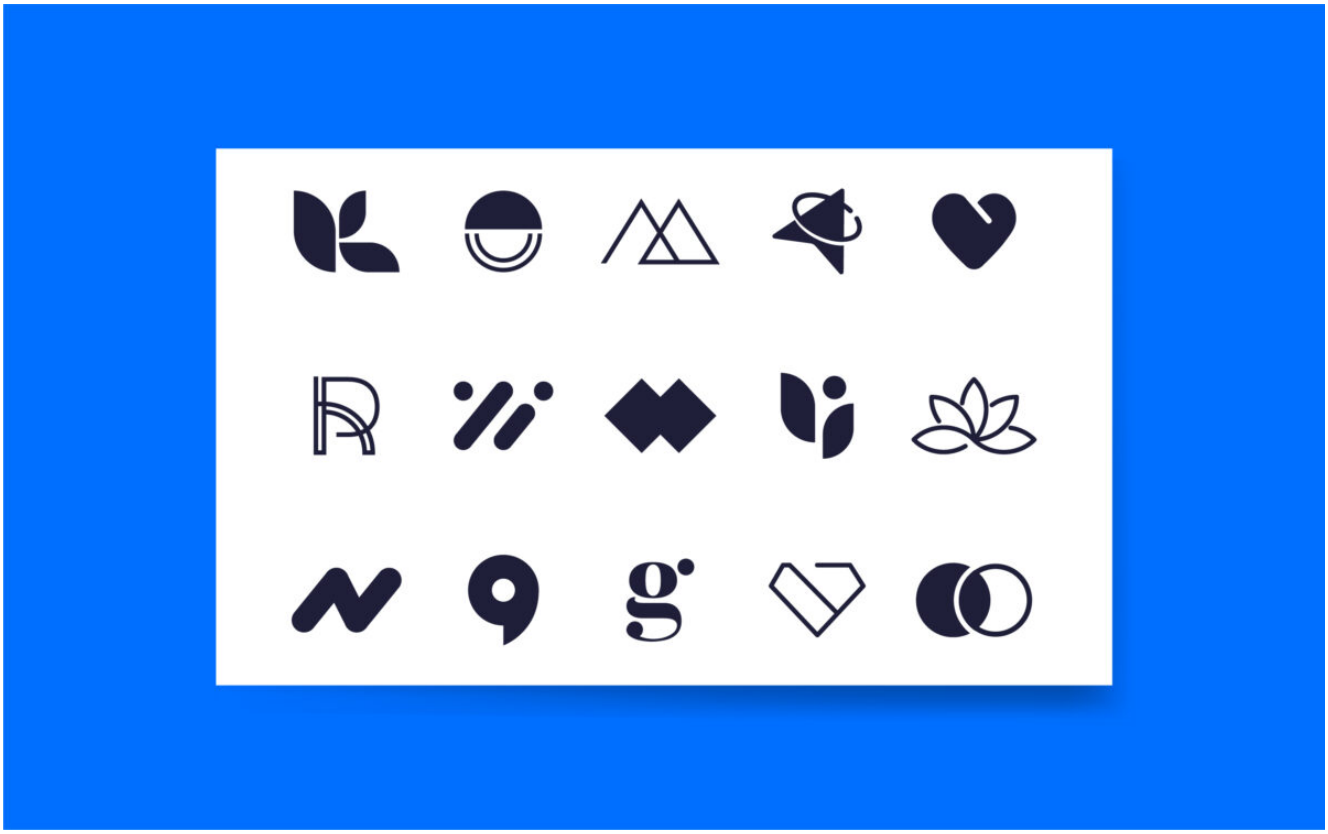
Today, we know to connect with customers, we don't just need a compelling logo, we need an identity that combines everything from shape and color psychology, to brand personality. However, that hasn't stopped the logo from being an enduring and powerful tool for companies.

As we move into the future, and new design trends and technologies emerge, the evolution of logos is bound to continue. We've already seen the rise of things like Favicons for browsers and mobile apps. Companies even create multiple variations of logos for different media.

What's more, graphic designers are becoming more intelligent and creative than ever before. With countless tools at their disposal, there's virtually no limit to what innovators can do with a logo.

Though we've come a long way since the beginnings of logo design, we may only be scratching the surface of what's possible in the landscape. Who knows where logo design will be ten, twenty, or even one hundred years from now?

Our ability to represent ourselves, and the things that matter to us in a visual, symbolic fashion will undoubtedly generate countless new innovative iterations of logos and signs in the years to come.



The enduring power of logo design

Looking back at the history of logo design is interesting.

It shows us how people and communities have changed over the years, to enhance the way they communicate through design and graphic elements. Despite its deep roots and extensive background, logo design remains somewhat mysterious.

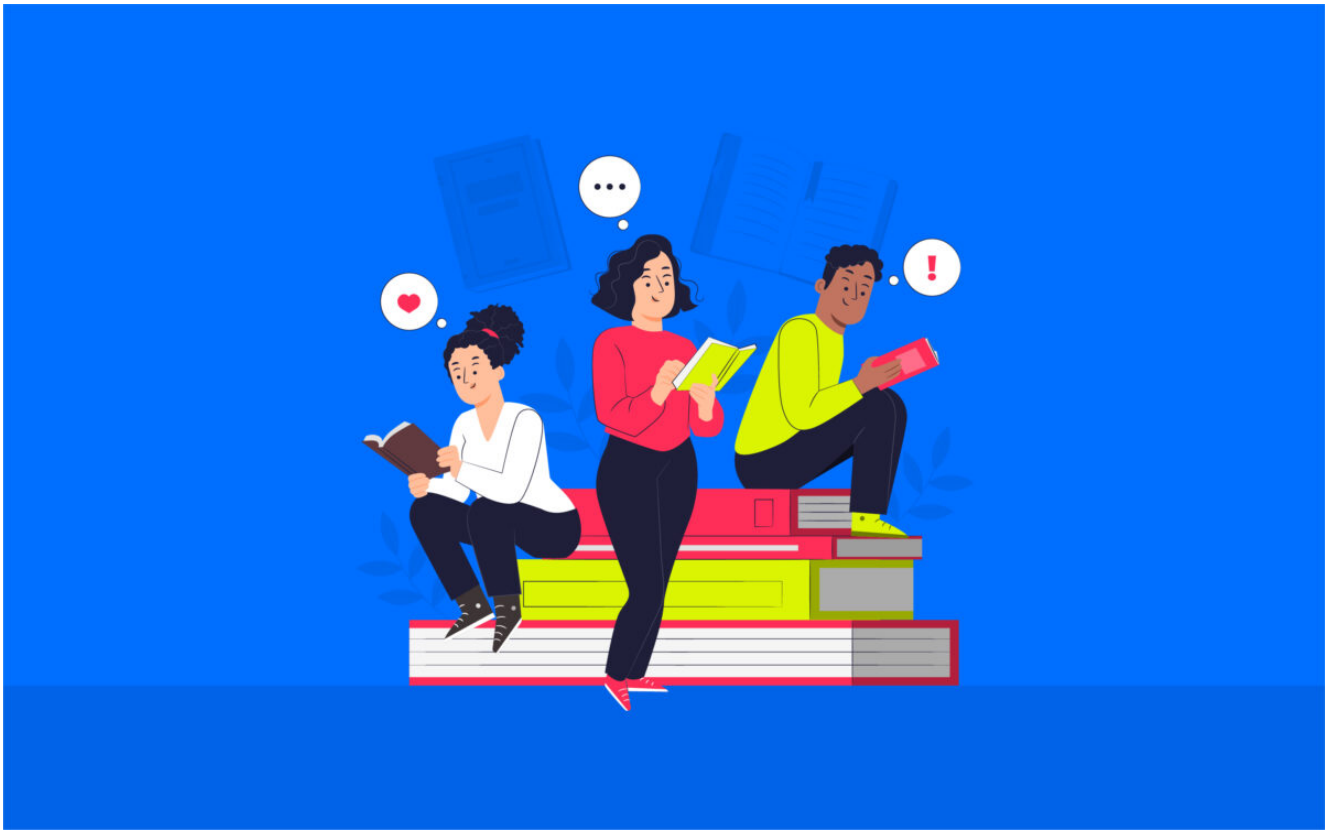
So much of the impact of brand logos remains open to interpretation, and we're still exploring the psychology of logo design and symbolism on a broad scale.

Whatever changes may come to the world of graphic design, one thing will remain consistent. Graphic designers and artists in the modern world possess the power to bring meaning to the world around us.

Logo designers can filter the values and personality of a business down to its raw elements, turning complex concepts into simple shapes and color palettes. Their ability to

connect with the human mind makes logos one of the most powerful marketing tools any business can access.

Logos don't just differentiate brands anymore, they reflect the values and principles those companies advocate. A logo is more than just a signature in today's world, it's a tool for creating brand loyalty, capable of becoming a status symbol in a cultural landscape.



Learning from the history of logo design

If the compelling history of logo design tells us anything, it's that symbols have always been a crucial part of human communication. Even long before we knew what digital marketing and social media would be, logos were crucial to our economy, and landscape.

The fundamental desire humans have to understand the world in visual terms makes logos an ever crucial and enduring asset

for any brand. Graphic design's ability to ascribe meaning to symbols and colors remains just as valuable today as it was hundreds of years ago.

However, as logo design has become more common, and businesses continue to embrace the power of logos in branding, competition is rising. The market is now flooded with brand images of all shapes, forms, and sizes, each with their own distinct meaning.

This makes it more important than ever for companies old and new to ensure their own brand mark can stand out from the crowd. In a world where complex logo are less common, and the most popular logos are often straightforward, simple marks, many businesses need help.

Working with a logo designer, capable of transforming complex ideas into simple concepts, will ensure organizations can continue to thrive in the new age of branding.

Reach out to Fabrik Brands today to learn more about how you can take your logo design into the new era, and connect with your target audience.

Fabrik: A branding agency for our times.