

Creating Icons



Adelle Wapnick is the founder and managing director of Cross Colours. Her career in the world of marketing and communications began in the direct marketing field, spanning agencies including DMB&B, SMLB and Red Nail, before she branched out on her own in a bid to find some balance. Together with Joey Pastoll and Janine Rech, the trio started Cross Colours 13 years ago. The agency prides itself on a passion for creativity and an ethos built on high levels of integrity. It is an award-winning agency with clients including Nando's, Sasol, Jack Daniels, Mercedes-Benz SA, Oracle Airtime Sales, and Virgin Money.

Brands looking for long-term staying power could learn a thing or two from examples of iconic images and the universal meaning they have managed to embody.

Advertising campaigns last a season but icons last a lifetime. This is not another tired and boring industry debate on design versus advertising. Advertising is as important as design and some ad campaigns have changed the face of a brand, awoken the world to its existence, defined it, made it famous, infamous, sold millions of products and won countless awards. However, the creation of an icon achieves what an advertising campaign on its own cannot. It instils in a brand the kind of longevity that transcends advertising messages, and even the product itself.

So what does it take to create an icon? The fact is that true icons are seldom intentionally created and the process is often a retrospective one. They don't develop because of some deliberate plan, but rather come into being over time through the creation of memorable events and collective experiences. Very often, they develop out of an abstract idea, theology or philosophy. Take Nelson Mandela's face for example. It embodies the intangible qualities of justice and equality. Imprisoned on convictions

for crimes while he spearheaded the struggle against apartheid, he faced adversity with absolute dignity. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, 1993, he embodies the fight and right for freedom and democracy. His face can be found on t-shirts, cushions, coasters, aprons because of what he represents. He has reached iconic status. Unintentionally, but justifiably.

The origin of the icon lies in the visage of another man of stature. According to Reyer Kras, Dutch industrial designer and art historian, the origin of the term 'icon' goes back to the Byzantine empire, when the emperor of the time dispatched portraits of himself to the furthest corners of the empire to ensure that he was not forgotten. These portraits not only depicted his likeness but also represented his power and absolute rule, and in so doing came to symbolise the unity of the empire despite his physical absence in certain parts of it. Icons then developed to support religions with a deeper symbolic interpretation, becoming manifestations of ideas from an intangible, mystical world. These icons and the ideas they embodied gave people something tangible to worship. Over time that has not changed, but other things have.

Today, icons have gone beyond the transference of an idea or philosophy to simple images, which are used to convey universal meaning simply and effectively. Borne out of necessity, these icons have been purposefully developed as a means to an end. They

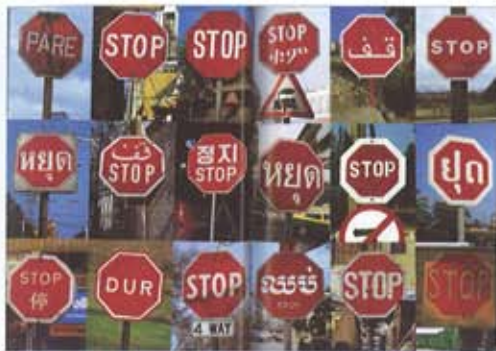
still however, continue to embody deep levels of symbolism. The STOP sign is an icon used to control traffic. It speaks universally, with authority, we respect and obey it (well, some of us do!). The intangible idea behind it was the creation of order. Similarly

each iconic sign has its own set of rules, guiding engagement with the user. Then there are symbols, which impart a single-minded message and are classified as icons. The Red Cross symbol, empathetic, supporting and humane, carries with it all the values it has come to embody.

The white dove or olive branch symbolise peace. The former is emblematic of innocence and virtue, largely due to the fame of Pablo Picasso's 1949 lithograph for the International Peace Congress in Paris, while the latter is universally associated with peace, partly thanks to biblical history but also due to practical reasons (you cannot cultivate an olive grove in a war zone). The more we understand the intangible symbolism behind the creation, the greater the stature it is likely to possess.

Learning from history, and with the understanding that with the right treatment images can develop into icons, brands too have tried to achieve the same stature. Logos, emblems, product design, graphics on packaging and slogans are being developed in the hope that they will become rich in symbolic meaning, be instilled in the public consciousness and one day go beyond simple brand status to become iconic. Great brands





are developing these layers in an attempt to find emotional resonance, create cultural relevance and preserve continuity.

Successful South African examples include Lucky Star pilchards, Kiwi polish, Lion matches and Iwisa mealie-meal. They represent daily

life in South Africa, both yesteryear and today. They evoke memory and carry with them meaning that goes far beyond their original intention as packaging. This is why they grace everything from chic shacks and wallpaper to handbags and t-shirts. In transcending their everyday and originally-intended function, and in embodying new meaning, they have managed to achieve iconic status.

The South African Coat of Arms, the emblem which is the highest visual symbol of the state, is another example. What's important to note is that it is rich in symbolism, from our national bird to the protea, which represents among other things the country flowering as a nation. Wheat represents the fertility of the land, while the elephant tusks stand

for wisdom and steadfastness. These elements together come to mean something more than 'the South African state'. However, what it really comes to symbolise is dependent on the degree to which it's honoured.

International examples of icons

reveal the same characteristics. Some commercial examples lie in the Coke bottle or Lucky Strike cigarette packaging. However, a more notable example is the United States police department who use a shield design. Traditionally used by law enforcement agencies, it is not only a signifier of the police department itself, but has come to be a symbol of authority and is representative of the official emblem of the United States. The badge is believable, its intention honoured, not because it's attractive, but because it is supported by a constitution, a political and judicial system that enables it to deliver on its promises. Similarly, the eagle is symbolic of protection for the people and their rights as guaranteed under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights of the United States of America. Both are icons and used outside of the US to represent law and order, freedom and democracy. An opportunity for South Africa lies in our very own SAPS. The badge is an icon crucial to our existence yet is in great need of assistance. It could, and should stand for all things great; justice, protection, safety, shielding, community and caring. If properly supported, it could develop to become iconic. There is a choice and it's a choice I have no doubt that we as a nation, would all welcome.

Logos, emblems, typefaces, brand icons and slogans all contribute to the brand experience and its essence. Developing all these elements within a brand's portfolio is an important part of brand building because their collective representation illustrates the values and the positioning of the brand. Developed over time, they can assist with ensuring a much deeper and more meaningful relationship with the consumer. They ensure longevity. The development of experiences



that have the power to create long-term, emotional connections with consumers is critical if a brand is to differentiate itself from others. Get that right, and your brand may just achieve iconic status.

What such examples show is that great design needs to be paired with strong symbolism so that an image comes to represent an idea, and not just the country, product or brand that it signifies. Only then does the symbol stand a chance of becoming truly iconic. It requires the image to fulfill that emotional connection with its audience, both with its intention and with its delivery of the sentiment it's intending to impart.

