

The incomplete art of brand imagery

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Companies have used incomplete typefaces to create brand logos, but these stylized approaches intended to generate visual interest have positive and negative influences on consumer perceptions about a company, according to surveys conducted by a Boston College professor. Altered typefaces can result in a firm being perceived as inventive, but also raise questions about the company's trustworthiness, according to Henrik Hagtvedt, a professor of marketing at the Carroll School of Management. Credit: Journal of Marketing

The visual power of a brand can be the first breakthrough companies make with their customers. But efforts to artistically manipulate the typeface of a corporate logo can backfire for firms, according to a Boston College researcher.

Consumers may perceive companies that use incomplete typeface logos — such as the horizontal baby blue stripes that form the letters IBM — as innovative. However, these firms run the risk of being viewed as untrustworthy, according to a report forthcoming in the July issue of the *Journal of Marketing*.

Henrik Hagtvedt, a marketing professor in Boston College's Carroll School of Management, surveyed nearly 500 participants who viewed a

series of logos with parts of the characters of the company name intentionally missing or blanked out. While the intent is to create interest in a brand, Hagtvedt found that these stylized logos can have a double-edged effect on consumer perceptions.

"Incompleteness is a device that is often used in paintings and drawings," explained Hagtvedt, whose background is in fine arts. "It sparks the viewers' interest. When applied to a logo, the resulting perceptual ambiguity is interesting and causes the firm to be perceived as innovative."

On the other hand, "Incompleteness may be interpreted as unclear communication, which can lead to the perception that the firm is untrustworthy," Hagtvedt said.

Further, incomplete typeface logos have an unfavorable influence on the overall attitude toward the firm among [consumers](#) who are focused on preventing bad outcomes rather than on achieving good ones. Therefore, although such stylized logos might be a good idea for an entertainment firm, they might be a bad idea for an insurance company.

According to Hagtvedt, the findings suggest that [firms](#) should avoid incomplete typeface logos if perceptions of trustworthiness are critical, or if their customers are likely to have a prevention focus. However, such logos may be successfully employed with promotion-focused consumers, and they may be used as a tool to position a firm as innovative.

Hagtvedt, who had an international career as a visual artist before becoming a marketing scholar, believes "Aesthetic devices like incompleteness are tied to universal principles of human perception, and as such they are applicable to both art and marketing. However, while this device has been successfully used by artists for millennia,

corporations attempting the same should be aware of both the risks and the rewards."

Provided by Boston College

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