

Is "Identity" a Profession?

And would your mother let you marry one?

In 1965, as a recently minted MBA, I was recruited by Lippincott & Margulies where Walter Margulies' idea of a pure-play "Corporate Identity" business was fermenting. It was conceptually stimulating stuff, and I was excited to contribute in small ways to its early evolution. One way or another I have been practicing "identity" ever since. In hindsight it was like tasting an enchanted apple, that spoiled the taste of other fruit.

Since 1965 I've met many brilliant people, some of them designers and others (like me) with a marketing background, who are similarly infected... identity people. Russ Anspach, Gene Grossman, Ken Love, Ken Roberts, Ken Cooke (a lot of Kens), Roger van den Bergh, Peter Phillips and Elsie Maio to name a few... all of us tasted the identity apple, for better or worse, and were perhaps spoiled for other gainful employment.

It *can* be a bitter fruit. In the 70s I visited my prior Advertising professor, Martin Marshall, to share my fascination with identity consulting. He disappointed me. He saw identity as merely names and logos... a simple product, oversold with smoke and mirrors and hugely overpriced: "I am ashamed that a student of mine is engaged in that shallow and deceitful business." (Marty's attitude, I am happy to stress, is not shared by current Harvard faculty like Stephen Greyser.)

We still struggle to overcome this 'smoke and mirrors' problem, in part the flip side of Margulies' correct insistence on services (and prices) intended to command the attention and respect of the CEO. But I suggest Identity, seen whole, is indeed a distinctive and focused profession. It is the profession which applies skills of design and language to the leadership of institutions. This requires highly specialized knowledge and experience, and (as with Law or Medicine) it can be done well or badly with significant consequences for the client.

I grant you -- this is not an easy sale.

But I think what hooks people who plan names, and design logos, is this: we *know* how powerful an impact our work can have on the institution, and we enjoy it. We may be as close to creating and shaping the company itself as you can get, without actually being the CEO. Just think about all the things an institution's name, logo, theme line, unit names and unit signature system can potentially achieve:

- ? they can establish the 'positioning' the entity intends to earn;
- ? they can help create its distinguishing culture and quality;
- ? they can reveal the coherence and purposes of its composition.

To determine "where we're going, and how we organize ourselves and behave to get there" ... isn't this what leadership is all about?

And the cost? Truly our professional fees are usually higher than the starting expectation ("We just need a logo!") because the work is enormously broader, and does indeed demand highly qualified professional specialists. But measured either by its impact or by comparison with the Andersons and McKinseys (consultants of comparable turf), identity fees are peanuts.

Identity people know all this. Our clients learn it too. But at the end of the day, to our neighbors (and our mothers), we just do names and logos. And frankly, it doesn't *seem* a terribly exalted function, not even particularly difficult.

So: If *you* are attracted to the practice of Identity, you will also have the excitement of shaping, and earning respect, for your profession. Welcome!

By Tony Spaeth, June 1999, for
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