

Logos: Put Your Best Face Forward



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An unprofessional or inadequate logo can mortally wound a small company's image. At the same time, a slick-looking letterhead or business card can create an impression of professionalism and experience. Many small-business owners, however, don't have the money or the clout to hire a graphic-art company for a smartly designed custom logo. Others simply don't understand how important such a logo is.

Enter Morgan Lynch, co-founder and CEO of LogoWorks, based in Lindon, Utah. His 62-employee company specializes in creating effective logos and making over bad ones for small-business clients. Smart Answers columnist Karen E. Klein recently spoke with Lynch about what goes into crafting an effective, eye-catching logo, and how small businesses can go about improving their public face. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow.

Q: How important is a logo for a small company?

A: First impressions count, especially with small businesses. If you're a client and you're looking at whether you want to do business with Company Y or Company Z, you'll be more likely to go with the one that appears professional and credible because of the way it represents itself. A great logo can make a small company appear more like a big business, and it can also help keep customers loyal.

For instance, you may have a competent and friendly dry-cleaning business, but if you have a boring or unprofessional-looking logo, your customers will be tempted to try the new dry cleaner with the great logo and great image when he inevitably comes along. The same thing happens with your employees, so a good logo also has an impact within your company. When you have a poor image, it's tough trying to hire good people.

Q: But how often do small-business owners even think about their logos?

A: Not often. Most small companies have some kind of graphic or logo they use, but they typically don't think much about it until they need a sign or new business cards. Sometimes they'll have a signage company come up with a logo for them, which means they're hiring a high school student who works with clip art.

Other people try to create their own logos using graphics programs. But that's like cutting your own hair: Do you really want to do it? If someone has a very creative streak, they might pull it off, but most of us don't have that creativity and couldn't do it right by ourselves.

Q: What should a company's logo convey?

A: Most of all, a logo should reflect what that company's customers are looking for and what will make them trust and love the firm. A lot of entrepreneurs are thinking more about what they like aesthetically about a logo than about who they are selling to -- that's a big mistake. A logo should show that a company is a real business, and it should convey confidence to the customer. Especially for the small service businesses, who work in people's homes and must cultivate their trust, clip art doesn't cut it.

Q: What major mistakes do you commonly find when you're redesigning bad logos?

A: A lot of business owners insist on including the "Inc." or "LLC" in their logo. I tell them to look at large corporations like Nike or IBM. You'll never see their business designations in their logos. It's not needed, and it just makes the logo look cluttered.

Other people want to include long taglines with their logos. We tell them that straightforward and simple is the best way to go. They shouldn't include too much text in their logo.

When it comes to color, everyone had to be careful about using it even five years ago, due to high printing costs for

four-color logos. Now, with digital printing, we're capable of using colors more effectively. On the downside, some people are choosing too many colors just because the cost has come down.

We tell people not to go crazy and make their logos overcomplicated by adding color. We see a lot of business owners who try to improve an existing logo themselves, so they start doing things to it like adding colors, taking things out, moving something around, adding symbols, or putting in taglines. Consistency is really important. Once you get a logo you like, use it as is -- don't mess with it.

Q: Give us an example of some really bad logos and how you improved them?

A: We see awful logos on a daily basis. New clients upload these images to us and say, "Can you please just make this look better?" And a lot of them are horrible. I think the worst one we ever saw was a logo for a computer dealer in St. George (Utah). The guy drew this monkey-looking thing in a Microsoft Paint program. It was kind of a cross between a monkey and the Abominable Snowman, and it was so bad that it was almost good. I mean, it was so extremely awful that it was memorable.

We found it unbelievable that somebody had this logo and used it for years, especially in a business like computer sales and repair. But we figured that the logo was memorable so we didn't want to lose it entirely. So we redesigned the Abominable Snowmonkey and made it look high-tech and professional, but still memorable.

The other day we were working on a logo for a welder. He had taken some clip art and tried to make it into a grinding wheel with some sparks coming off it, but you really couldn't tell what it was. One of our illustrators took it and made it look really nice. So now it looks like a logo for a reputable ironwork business that you would feel comfortable having in your home, doing remodeling.

Q: What concerns do small-business owners have when it comes to creating or revamping their logos?

A: The timing and the price point are important. A large branding agency may take many months to create a new logo for a corporation. But for small-business owners, even taking two weeks to create a logo is a long time.

We try to make the process as speedy as possible, sometimes even fitting it all within a week. And of course, they're concerned about price. Small companies that are just getting started don't have a lot of money to spend, so we keep our package prices low and base our business model on doing quality work in volume.

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