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VISUAL RHETORIC: THE RHETORIC OF NIKE'S IDENTITY

The Introduction

The Nike brand is considered a highly effective brand across many disciplines. Business professionals and consumers alike, view the Nike brand as established and well respected. According to Scott Bedbury in his book, "A New Brand World" (2002) "The brand idea is no longer confined just to packaged consumer products. Today the word "brand" has become part of the vernacular within every department of any progressive company" (1). While corporate branding is often at the forefront of brand identity, we choose to take a different approach. We will be examining the visual rhetoric of the Nike brand and how the visual rhetoric components effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness. We will use rhetorical theories based on semiotics, gender, narrative representation and spatial experience. We will be paying specific attention to the Nike logo, slogan, print advertisements, Web site, and the NikeTown retail stores all as mediums for rhetorical branding.

The Logo

Another name for a logo is a trademark or signature (Ryan 393). For Nike, the swoosh has become just that- a signature. With or without the word Nike underneath it, the general population will see the swoosh and associate it with Nike. Regardless of the resemblance to ancient gods or to a check of excellence, the aerodynamic nature of the logo has contributed to the marketing and business success of the brand, as it has imbued a simple brand mnemonic with meaning. This makes the brand more memorable, and use of the brand symbol more effective. However, the success of the swoosh as a visually rhetorical element takes a different angle.

The rhetorical representation of the logo must communicate within one single image everything the organization wants the public to know about them. The logo is the heart of an organization's identity. It will show up on all products and publicity materials and must become synonymous with the organization's actual name. Besides the above stated requirements of effective branding, a logo must go one step further in order to be persuasive visually.

The purpose of visual rhetoric is to persuade visually. The swoosh simultaneously represents athleticism, competition and victory. With one solid brush stroke, viewers of the swoosh know that this is what it means. Yet Nike's audience does not notice this at first upon examination of the swoosh because "visual communication is always coded [and] seems transparent only because we know the code already, at least implicitly" (Kress 32). It looks similar to the wings on the feet of the god Hermes and a wing of the goddess Nike. The swoosh also resembles a check mark which, in American culture, has become representative of success and a job

well-done. In semiotics, these implicit, learned code systems are used to create messages. Symbols are culturally bound and have a shared meaning within the culture (Trenholm 376). Nike prides itself in creating state of the art athletic equipment from running shoes to soccer balls and using a logo that rhetorically represents success and visually ties into the ancient gods of sport explains its success as a successful, simple and recognizable trademark. This clear logo is a perfect example of mixing rhetorical semiotics (recognizable links to wings of gods and the check of a job well-done) and simplicity (the logo is one swift brush stroke) to create a rhetorically strong brand basis. As John Berger notes, "publicity images belong to the moment in the sense that they must be continually renewed and made up-to-date. Yet they never speak of the present. Often they refer to the past and always they speak of the future" (130). For Nike, referring to the wings of Hermes and Nike as well as referring to the cultural symbol of a check communicate their visual argument successfully.

The Slogan

"Just Do It" is the tagline associated with the Nike logo. This tagline is habitually positioned alongside Nike's logo, whether it is in a print or television advertisement. Together, the logo and tagline feature the significance of Nike's brand goals and ideals-athleticism and victory. The logo design symbol, along with the tagline, has evolved into a motto and the way of life for a whole generation. According to John Heskett, "Objects and environments can be used by people to construct a sense of who they are, to express their sense of identity". The Nike logo and tagline serve to identify ordinary human beings as icons for action and excellence.

In relating this concept to visual rhetoric, one can look to the readings of Arnheim, Barthes and McCloud and their impressive discussion on semiotic surfaces. Arnheim stresses in his essay that the terms sign, symbol and picture do not stand for kinds of images, but rather, describe the function fulfilled by the images. He discusses how an image serves as a sign to the extent to which it stands for a particular content, without reflecting its characteristics visually. This description can serve written language as well. These concepts are fully present in the Nike brand. The swoosh logo, as well as tagline, portray a particular image and slogan that stands for a particular content, without reflecting its features visually.

The logo is fundamentally a swoosh. It looks like a check mark. It's plain, simple and yet, unmistakable. It's meaning is more intense, deeper and influential as described in the above section.

The "Just Do It" tagline is similar in this manner. When we read words, the words are describing a content, yet do not reflect it visually. Words are most definitely serving as signs, and provide identification and distinction. Although the tag line is too, fundamentally simple, it is distinct in its meaning. "Just Do It" means don't think, don't ask, don't talk about it, don't regret it, just do it. The visual displays alongside this motto coincide with this notion. Sports figures and general athletes are depicted as having supreme athletic prowess, at the top of

their game. "It appeals to the desire to be free, independent, overcoming all obstacles and social and physical inhibitions and limitations— and one can see how this appeals to the athlete or athlete to be, if not to everyone."

The Print Advertisements

One of the most effective brand elements is the use of print advertisements. These advertisements not only function as a sales tool, but at their core, they serve a rhetorical purpose, to persuade us. Nike embodies this function in the use of their "real women" advertisements. These advertisements showcase what seem to be real women and highlight a specific part of their body. According to USA Today.com, the ads show "a mix of pro athlete models and real women appear in ads with shots of their legs, butt, hips or arms. The fit women are unapologetic about what they call their 'big butt' or 'thunder thighs.'" Spokesperson for Nike, Caren Bell, comments that, "The ads try to illustrate that 'not all body types are created equally. To be a woman athlete, fit and strong doesn't mean you have to be sample size."

However, these images embody what Scott A. Lukas, Ph.D, refers to as "no object" advertisements. Here women are denied agency, the women are objectified and their identity is concealed. The Nike "real women" ads show only isolated body parts, never revealing to the viewer the woman's whole body. John Berger explains in his book, "Ways of Seeing" (1972) that men are the spectators and the women are the objects – or the things that are made desirable. Berger simplifies this by stating, "men act and women appear" (47). In the Nike "real women" ads, the unidentified women expresses the perceptions that she has about herself. These Nike ads play on women's insecurities, yet displays them in a way that empowers the female. These ads go against the grain and are rhetorical in the sense that they act as persuasive liberation. While the format of the ads are not new, the way that the text changes the meaning of the ads is a significant feature of the Nike "Real Women" ads.

In addition, Berger explains how words are able to change the meaning of a particular image. "It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The Image now illustrates the sentence" (28). The Nike ads would certainly be different if the words were absent from the ad. Without the words we see only a disjointed body, that has no identity. The words work to tell a story and explain the woman's highlighted body part. The words in the ad are persuasive in that they attempt to get the audience to sympathize with the woman's feelings and provide a context, which is based on our culture, that is needed in understanding the advertisements in their entirety.

The Conclusion

Traditionally, branding is not considered rhetorical, but after further investigation we have been able to reveal the rhetorical nature of the branding movement. With branding,

corporations are creating a visual argument that represents a specific image, lifestyle and essence. The visual elements that Nike uses in its branding strategy include logo, slogan, print advertisements, Web site and retail stores. Each branding medium uses distinct visually rhetorical tactics to convey its brand message. The visual rhetorical tactics used by Nike include semiotics, gender, narrative representation and spatial experience. The fusion of these rhetorical tactics create an effective Nike brand.

It is important to understand that there is a visual argument behind all brands. Using the elements of visual rhetoric to critically examine brands provides a different lens of understanding brand effectiveness. While we only analyzed the Nike brand, one should apply rhetorical theories to all brand identities so as to gain a broader understanding of corporate ideals.

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CREATING YOUR OWN VISUAL RHETORIC

The Assignment

After reading about the visual rhetoric of Nike, you will be creating your own logo (an organization's symbol/design, not the rhetorical device for the appeal to logic/reason) for a brand of your choice. (Due Fri., May 24, 2019) [25 points]

The Requirements

Your logo must take into consideration the mission, purpose, and story of the brand in order to create a visual representation and appeal to your audience. You may use an existing brand and create a new, original logo for this brand, or you may create your own brand, mission, purpose, story, and a coinciding logo for your fictional brand. If you are using an existing brand, you must research their real mission, purpose, and story to include here.

The Brand

The Brand's Mission

The Brand's Purpose

The Brand's Story

The Logo

The Process

Answer the following questions in complete sentences to articulate your ideas and thoughts.

Why did you design the logo like this and use these design elements (i.e. color, line, etc.)?

How did you incorporate the brand's mission, purpose, and story into your logo design?

What do you hope the audience thinks and feels from looking at your logo design?
