

The Age - Memo to CEO



PICTURE: JUSTIN MAMINUS

Memo to CEO: remember to call the graphic designer

By JANE HOLROYD

HAVING been at the creative helm of some of Australia's biggest branding projects — Telecom's metamorphosis into Telstra, the Sydney Olympics, the redeveloped MCG and Melbourne's Commonwealth Games — Richard Henderson is one of Australia's better-known graphic designers and brand strategists.

He has helped shape now instantly recognisable logos for BHP Billiton, Crown Casino, ANZ, the Melbourne Aquarium and Victoria Police.

Mr Henderson says good design is a conduit for effective communication, not just about making things look good.

It is not uncommon to see him wearing a pin bearing the Melbourne Commonwealth Games logo on the lapel of his immaculate suits. "I like people to ask about it," he says. "It gives me a chance to explain the story behind the design."

The logo was designed by FutureBrand FHA when Mr Henderson was creative director, and his new venture, R-Co, is the visual identity consultant for the Games.

The dancer and athlete entwined symbolise sport and culture colliding at an event that is not about winning and power but about passion and nations celebrating together, he explains.

Asked how he will measure the success of the design project, Mr Henderson says the success of the Games will be measured by its legacy. "You can measure it in tangible ways, like by the number of people who attend. But this could be determined by something intangible, like whether people embrace the message about this being a celebration."

Design can work the same way for businesses, he says. "In the 1970s, graphic design was more about being decorative. Now it's about communication strategy."

People might wonder why big companies such as National Australia Bank or Channel Nine spend millions rejigging their logos, but Mr Henderson says such companies cannot afford to be seen standing still.

"In the broadcasting industry it is essential that you're always evolving, because technology is always changing," he says of Nine's logo change last month. "I guess they thought the nine balls were a throwback to the 1970s."

The articulation of a company's identity — its values, aspirations and what makes it unique among competitors — has to be decided in the boardroom, not in the marketing department, Mr Henderson says.

He points to Richard Branson at Virgin and Jack Welch, former head of General Electric, as examples of corporate chiefs who invested in their brands heavily and to great success.

Ken Cato, from Cato Purnell Partners, says there are too few graphic designers like Richard Henderson in Australia who appreciate the need to work closely with company decision makers. "In Europe and in the USA you see designers sitting on company boards," he says.

Russell Bevers, head of communication design at RMIT, says graphic design is almost "an invisible profession" in Australia. "Graphic design is all around us and it influences the products and services we buy but people are largely unaware of it. It's almost subliminal."

Mr Henderson says it is more important than ever for companies to draw on design to articulate their values.

"There is no loyalty any more," he says. "When I was a kid people used one bank. Now they have one for their credit card, and another for their mortgage . . . Every company has to be creative because their audience is more literate and knows more about what is being offered to them."

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