



Seattle's Best Coffee Logo Is a Blend of the Bland

By Ken Carbone Tue May 25, 2010



In the spirit of full disclosure, I confess that I drank my last cup of coffee 35 years ago. So I shouldn't care about the re-branding of a legacy Seattle coffee merchant. However, the new logo introduced last week by Seattle's Best Coffee deserves a branding taste test.

Seattle's Best is a subsidiary of Starbucks that offers, according to CEO Howard Schultz, a "more approachable taste profile for a mainstream market." Evidence of this is the fact that company executives plan to start distributing their product at Burger King and AMC theaters. Does this mean that coffee will be just coffee again? The answer is yes, if the logo is any guide.

The new look is a composite of visual clichés--a simple, reductive "sign," a neutral void that is open to wide interpretation. I don't think it is intended to make you feel anything. In the end this is its strength. It's just right for a less discerning customer who could care less about a caramel macchiato with light whip top and the related price tag.

There is no crime in this as many great logos employ familiar iconic cues to make them more communicative. There is nothing new about an apple, a target or even a "swoosh." For the SBC logo, a circle is an obvious choice. There are no square coffee cups. The typeface is harmless in that it says nothing. The color evokes the rich aroma of... cranberry juice. And, is that crescent shape an open mouth with an uvula dangling in the back of the throat?

Sometimes there is beauty in the banal. Andy Warhol proved that. The risk in this approach is that customers often aspire to something greater, which demands striking a perfect balance of brand image and product quality.

The old logo is full of faults too. It is formulaic in that it follows the tried and true pattern of food brands. It's made to evoke craftsmanship and homemade authenticity. Frankly, it reminded me of a cigar band. The management of Seattle's Best Coffee need not to worry: The logo might not be loved but if it represents "good enough" coffee, few will care. And after it is printed on millions of cups, "ye olde" logo of the past will just be a faded memory.

And while I find the new logo bland, the true measure of its success will be the myriad of applications it gets applied to and how well they are integrated across all channels and markets. If done correctly, it could make Seattle's Best Coffee a very well-known brand.

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Ken Carbone is among America's most respected graphic designers, whose work is renowned for its clarity and intelligence. He has built an international reputation creating outstanding programs for world-class clients, including Tiffany & Co., W.L. Gore, Herman Miller, PBS, Christie's, Nonesuch Records, the W Hotel Group, and The Taubman Company. His clients also include celebrated cultural institutions such as the Musée du Louvre, The Museum of Modern Art, The Pierpont Morgan Library, The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the High Museum of Art.

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