COVER THE EARTH

by

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Problem.
Solution.
Despite all the time and effort a graphic designer may put into a company’s branding, audiences are able to see and interpret a logo however they wish. This often works in conjunction with the observer’s associations and feelings toward the brand. Regardless of whether or not the designer anticipates this variable of perception, it is as close to reality as a logo’s meaning can get. Even if a logo’s character relies heavily on conceptual clarity, there is always the potential for outside sources to alter its original intent. This is certainly the case for Sherwin Williams.

The brand adopted its “Cover the Earth” logo in 1905 as a result of its product line being sold internationally, expanding from its Cleveland origins into Canada, South America, and Europe. The logo was necessary for the brand to appear unified during a time when its products were being distributed further and further away from their source. While the logo has served its purpose from 1905 to present day, the mark is now being threatened by the recent rise in environmental awareness among consumers and a responsibility among paint suppliers to produce “eco friendly” products. When held to this new standard, the inappropriateness of the mark is uncharacteristic at the very least. The red product being dumped on top of the blue globe with the words, “COVER THE EARTH,” embedded is enough to get any eco conscious consumer questioning the ethics and values of Sherwin Williams. Throughout this project I explain the approach I took to this problem and how I reached my conclusion.
In order for the logo to succeed, in this metaphorical situation, certain aesthetic qualities must remain in order for the logo to stay recognizable to its familiar audience. The challenge arises when its content must be altered, while its formal semantics must stay somewhat familiar to its former self. The logo must change its attire while keeping one foot on the ground so to speak. It must relate to the old logo in such a way that its transformation seems natural rather than forced.

While much of the current logo’s character resides in its illustrative nature, these formal characteristics struggle once the mark is reduced to a smaller size. The current logo may hold up on a printed paint can label, but takes serious abuse when compressed into web based applications at a resolution of 72 dpi. “COVER THE EARTH” and “SWP” become illegible and imagery falls victim to ambiguity. The new logo must adopt a refined graphic simplicity in order to counteract this quandary. This formal decision making process along with the manipulation and altering of meaning are addressed in the following assessment.

The logo’s sudden increase in notoriety among the public is primarily an issue regarding content. The paint can pointing downward in the previous logo emphasizes the act of dumping. This, along with the paint drips, projects a wreck less and sloppy use and disposal of the product, rather than associating it with quality, craft, and environmental responsibility. The pot tilts upward in the new logo, suggesting a steady pour. Since the main issue concerning the old logo was its depiction of global harm, the world has been substituted with a circle. While the new approach involves an overall flattening out of the logo, the outermost strokes on both letterforms attempt to retain a sphere like quality. These strokes work in conjunction with the pour to create an optic flow between positive and negative space within the logo. The pour leads into the graphic letterforms in opposition to the former pour’s transition into run off. This circulation helps retain the previous notion of gravity present in the older logo, while projecting a new association with precision and clarity. The letterforms themselves are incorporated into the mark as both a way to help fill the open space brought on by the overall reduction of representational imagery and in hopes the logo will one day be able to stand on it’s own, unaccompanied by it’s typographic counterpart.
As with any branding opportunity, colors play a major role in how a brand presents itself. It is no coincidence the colors of Sherwin Williams are synonymous with the United States. The company would like to project similar American ideals, especially when products are being exported internationally. The decision to keep the same pantone inks was decided on early in the process. Since the goal is about maintaining brand recognition rather than appealing to a new audience, color serves as a unifying link between old and new. However, the colors must be utilized in a way that maintains a similar look and feel. In this situation the challenge is an issue of proper balance and proportions. The red to blue ratio of color has been translated into the new logo. Although the placement of color has more or less been flipped, the distribution of color has remained constant, red dominating in both scenarios. White highlights on the blue can and pour strive to preserve the interaction of blue and white found on the bottom half of the globe in the old logo. Along with their formal characteristics regarding weight and quantity, the colors also carry their own communicative connotations. By incorporating blue into the bucket and pour, the logo presents the product less threatening. This helps eliminate the logo’s depiction of environmental negligence brought on in part by the color red evoking harm. This is also reinforced by the downward pour continuing into a stroke that contains the lower half of the mark rather than smother it. The blue stroke surrounding the globe in the old logo conflicts with the red paint by inducing a color vibration. This takes away from the logo’s visibility when reduced to a small size. This problem has been addressed by separating the colors with a clean white line formed by the negative space.

A change in copy also needed addressed. “COLOR YOUR WORLD” works to communicate a more personalized feeling towards the brand without straying too far from its origins.
Of course, the brand’s success does not depend solely on its copy or visual appearance. The company has grown to the scale it has by making quality products available to homeowners and industry professionals alike, not because of their logo. Perhaps the real question to be asked is whether or not a brand as recognizable as Sherwin Williams needs to be updated despite sufficient flaws with its graphic logo. Is the mark simply a place holder, or has it now become a serious threat to how Sherwin Williams as a company is perceived? Is this really what consumers are thinking about when they purchase paint products? It is possible that the name Sherwin Williams is so ingrained in our consumer minds the logo serves only as a tool for identification above all else and to change this would backfire suddenly. My guess is if the owners of Sherwin Williams are ever going to rebrand it will be within the next 10 years. Then there will be only one way to determine whether or not the brand’s update has increased sales and public opinion. “Ask Sherwin Williams.”
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