Brand Better: Elements of an Identity Dissected and Explained *author unknown*
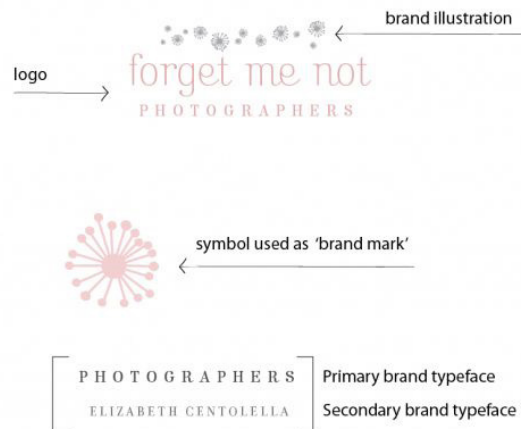
Words like "brand," "logo," "icon," and "mark" may seem interchangeable if you're new to the world of identity and brand design. To eliminate some of this ambiguity and add distinct meaning back into these seemingly-synonymous terms, I thought I would break down the various elements that I use to create a strong brand, including ways to add careful variations while maintaining consistent messaging and aesthetics.

For the purpose of this article, I created a templated brand for an imaginary photography company. Let's suppose that they're a group of female photographers specializing in lifestyle and wedding photography, and that they need a brand that speaks to their ideal target market*— females ages 18–24. The look could/ should be warm, slightly romantic, clean with a modern edge (a classic bit of inspiration from my days of branding a zillion photographers), but mainly appealing to a typical young, feminine audience.

The Logo
I think of the logo as the skeletal structure of the brand. People need to recognize the name of your company, it's simply the embodiment of your brand. Ideally, your brand would eventually be recognized without needing to include the name, but this takes careful planning and layering of conceptual information to achieve. Since this is the foundation (or "skeleton") in which everything else will be added, I like to focus on the main goal of the brand. Do you want it to convey stability, ingenuity, friendliness, or strength? Working with broader swaths of ideas rather than the fined-tuned details at this stage will set you up for a wide array of options to explore in later stages of the branding process.

You also should think about maintaining as much flexibility as possible within your logo design. Consider how the logo would look in a tiny banner ad, both square and rectangle. How will it look in black and white vs. the color version you have worked so carefully on? How will it look faxed, photocopied, or printed out on the oldest, cheapest printer to ever chug out ink blobs? Some designers may consider those instances entirely out of their control, but a savvy designer may be able to accommodate square, rectangle, big, small, glossy, fancy, color, and colorless within a single carefully-planned concept. If you think about all of the situations in which your logo will be viewed, it will absolutely help create a versatile and effective logo.

Typography
What I labeled "primary" and "secondary" typefaces above simply refers to how I plan to use the fonts together. Primary typography is usually the same font as the logo*— or as similar as I can get it. This primary type treatment can lead whatever copy needs to be designed: headers, words of emphasis, and other attention-grabbers. The secondary face, and even lower level faces would be used for more lengthy, more detailed language. It can't always be true, but ideally you would have one primary display face and one or two other text faces to balance out the different needs of the brand.

Iconography, Symbols, and Marks

So often people confuse these terms, and I completely understand why! Visually, it all looks like the same thing, but it's how the imagery works*— and to what end*— that defines each term.

Symbols are signs that represent, or infer a much larger idea, like the "$" as a symbol for the almighty dollar, and how flags are symbols of countries. Symbols are replacements or substitutions for the original, and they often require the viewer to recognize the symbol in order to understand it. If you had never heard of the US dollar, and had never seen a "dollar sign" ("$") before, you'd likely view it as an abstract design with little meaning behind it.

Icons are representations, or images, of a person, thing, or idea that is widely understood. It's why we have computer icons of mouses, trash cans, gender-assigned bathrooms, etc. We also use icons for celebrities and religious saints. While symbols are more metaphorical in nature, icons are simple, literal, standalone visual representations that usually don't assume any knowledge.

Marks are simply visual aspects of a brand that cannot be expressed by words.

In my example, I use the abstract star shape as a brand mark. It doesn't really stand for anything, but adds a playful and feminine element to be explored in various iterations across the mediums we have to work with.

What's Included in an "Identity"?

This would depend on the designer, but in my mind, identity constitutes the main outward-facing elements of a brand. This would include the logo, visual treatments (color palettes, patterns, illustrations, iconography, symbols), the style of those visual treatments, and the necessary printed collateral (business cards, letterheads, envelopes, other leave-behinds) the client might need.

"Leave behinds" are a catch-all term describing any additional items created to help market the brand. Stickers, post cards, rack cards, mailers, badges –*all things are possible here. I advise my clients to think of what will make the most sense for what they're trying to achieve. If you're mainly a wedding photographer, you may want to consider thank-you cards to portray a knowledge of etiquette within the world of weddings, but if you're more of a casual lifestyle photographer who's more masculine, consider giving away branded thank-you drink coasters to your clients. As long as they have some way for clients to contact you, I say focus on your personality and what you aim to achieve with this brand.*Branding is all about who you are, and what you bring to the table of what you do, so focusing on your differences when working in these pieces will pay off triple fold when attracting clients.

Creating a Cohesive Brand Without Being Redundant

This is the part of identity design that takes some finesse. In the example I created, I explored the different ways that the star shape could be manipulated. In the logo, as well as the majority of the printed collateral, the star shape is strung along, mimicking daisies, dandelion fluff, or some other abstract, airy, natural elements that help carry the feminine connotations. I also explored the idea of a dense branded pattern, playing on multiple tones of grey and a range of scale. The more you explore with the elements you've created, the more inventive your brand will become. Designers don't always have to keep the same elements in the exact same formation or format across every application –*change things up! Allow the elements to be interchangeable. In my example, I tried a string of flowers instead of one standalone "statement" flower. I also made a dense pattern and then experimented with "looser" one instead.

Despite the obvious variation, this can still feel cohesive. You're allowing the individual elements to speak for themselves. This way, you're establishing each element separately, allowing the best facets of the brand to come together. If you always use the same logo, with the same visual treatment, it's going to get stale very quickly. Switching things up from the start creates spontaneity and continues the idea of fresh, no matter how long you've had the design.

More practically, this method of variation also allows for easy branding updates for various social media outlets that constantly need to be adjusted, such as Facebook layout designs. When you begin to get more comfortable playing and exploring within the elements, you build your brand from the inside out, and nothing reads more genuine and well-designed than that.