

It's a Color-Coded World

Using color as a brand differentiator



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Consumers have long been trained to associate certain colors with specific brands. Take rental cars: I'm confident if I show you the color red and ask you about a rental car brand, you'll think of Avis, orange will make you think of Budget, gold will make you think of Hertz, and you'll associate green with National. Similarly, in the telecommunications business, it's as if representatives from AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile and Sprint sat around a table and divided the color wheel.

Tiffany & Co. blue is unmistakable (and trademarked), UPS is synonymous with brown and John Deere associates with forest green. Such examples establish the brands' identities with a clarity that is enviable as brands across sectors struggle to differentiate themselves. But does anybody care? After all, the fact that UPS is associated with brown doesn't really say anything about the brand, does it? And what does red say about Avis or green about National?

Being associated with a color is a hugely valuable asset for any brand. One of the biggest challenges for brand marketers is to generate instantaneous brand recognition whenever their target consumers encounter the brand, whether in advertising, in store or other via other touch points. Owning a

color can prompt brand identification, allowing consumers to know how to find the product and instantly recognize it.

Here's how to create linkage between your brand and a color:

1 Choose a color that is unique within the category. Steer clear of one that is already associated with other brands, or with the category itself. Choosing a color is less about natural fit and more about being distinctive. Brand marketers often worry about the meanings of a color—yellow makes people feel cheerful, purple signifies individuality, red means passion and anger. But in reality, once a brand “owns” a color, no one thinks about color psychology or color preferences. You aren't likely to come across consumers who select National for a rental car because they like green, or avoid Verizon because red makes them feel angry.

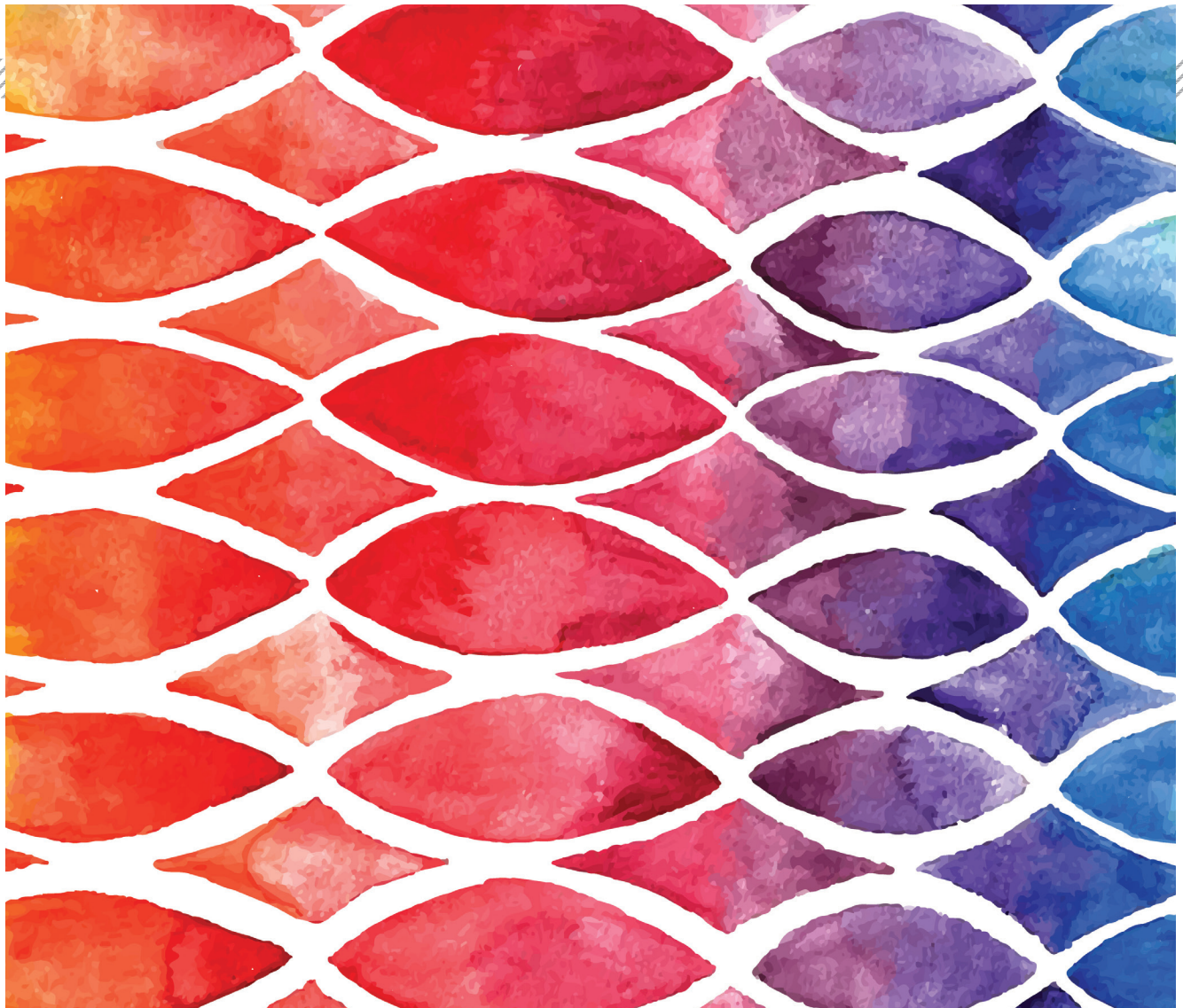
2 Use the color aggressively and consistently. The more consumers see a color in conjunction with your brand, the faster and firmer it will take hold. Having a purple logo isn't enough—everything about the brand should reinforce purple: the packaging, the dominant color within its advertising materials, the

color of the clothing worn by the actors in commercials, the trucks, the uniforms of company representatives. Everything.

Nearly all brands have some color associations, but they often extend no further than the logo. So, yes, consumers recognize your logo, but unless they see those colors in that particular shape, they provide little or no brand association. While having a color logo is a good place to start, this will only be effective if you are fortunate enough to have colors that are distinctive in your brand category. Starbucks could work to further extend its particular shade of green, while—despite very deep pockets—McDonald's will probably not be able to own yellow or red as these colors are too widely associated with fast food brands in general.

3 Take ownership of a color. While it involves a great deal of work and is an expensive undertaking, the more a brand invests initially, the faster it will build the link between the brand and the brand's color—and the faster the benefits will begin to accrue. When consumers see anything in print, in a video or out in the world that relates to your category, they'll know it's your brand. When you think about the thousands of potential interactions that consumers have with brands every day, ensuring that the brand's engagements inextricably link to your brand image can represent a huge competitive advantage.

The value of color associations is readily apparent in the ad campaigns run by brands with and without strong color ties. Typically, a new campaign takes time to build linkage with the brand. Depending on the characteristics



of the creative, and how well integrated the campaign is across media channels, it can take a year or more for the majority of consumers who engage with the advertising to be able to name the brand sponsoring the ad. In contrast, new campaigns in which a brand weaves its colors into the creative take virtually no time to become associated with the sponsoring brand.

T-Mobile has done a particularly masterful job at this: Its videos and static visual ads feature a shocking shade of pink.

UPS often has run ad campaigns that work to build its linkage

to the color brown. Invariably, when it launches campaigns that revolve around brown, it builds effectiveness more quickly than the campaigns that don't involve the brand's signature shade. The reason? Consumers immediately associate the claims with UPS—there's no learning curve associated with the color-coded ads. Do you associate any particular auto brands with colors? To many, they are all silver. That makes sense because silver conveys technology and luxury. And how about fast food? They're all red and yellow. That's because research

shows that shades of red and yellow make people want to eat—and fast.

It will take a brave auto brand or fast food purveyor to step up and seize ownership of indigo or purple or pink. But if one does—and is successful—others are sure to follow. Just look at the rental car and telecommunications categories. Once a category becomes color-coded, it's nearly impossible to compete without a color to call your own. **MI**

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