

Identify

Basic principles of identity design in the iconic trademarks of Chermayeff & Geismar

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Foreword: Chermayeff & Geismar, the firm

Chermayeff & Geismar is one of America's most prolific graphic, interactive, and exhibition design firms. The two names on the marquee belong to the founders Ivan Chermayeff and Tom Geismar, who have defined American postwar modernism. When read together in one rhythmic cadence, the title also signifies an impressive selection and collection of individual designers who have comprised the firm and have impacted the history of communication design.

Chermayeff & Geismar has touched so many businesses and institutions with their signature brand of modernism and eclecticism—their precisionist designs and smart conceptions—that American business and culture would not be the same without the firm. It is impossible to walk down a midtown Manhattan sidewalk without seeing a wide array of their logos, posters, shopping bags, and other commercial and cultural artifacts, like the Chase Bank and Mobil Oil trademarks. Along with hundreds of other familiar graphic marks and identities, their contributions are indelible signposts—some are even iconic.

Yet to the public even the most routinely recognized graphic design is largely anonymous, with designers rarely acknowledged outside of a small professional circle. While many laymen and designers can quickly identify trademarks for the Public Broadcasting System, NBC, Showtime, and Barneys New York, or have seen the exhibition at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, or will perhaps have snapshots taken next to the huge red nine in front of 9 West 57th Street, few people comprehend the authorship of these significant works.

Nonetheless it is necessary to acknowledge how Ivan Chermayeff, Tom Geismar, and their partners and associates have written—and along with partner Sagi Haviv continue to write—significant chapters in the graphic design legacy, from the 20th-century analog age through to the 21st-century digital age. Their collective influence on America's graphic design language cannot be overstated. This book is a record but also a testament. They have indeed made their mark with many marks. And they continue to do so.

Steven Heller

The **Library of Congress** is the largest library in the world and the United States' oldest federal cultural institution. Since its founding in 1800, the Library has grown into a complex organization serving multiple constituencies. It also includes the research arm of Congress, the U.S. Copyright Office, the American Folklife Center, an extensive Braille library, and other specialized divisions. By 2008, the Library had developed dozens of individual graphic representations for those various divisions.

After an internal brand strategy process, which was driven in large part by a desire to increase public awareness of the Library and its free public resources, the Library turned to us. The Library wanted a new graphic identity that would ensure "thinking, communicating and behaving as one enterprise connected by a unified vision." Extensive interviews with stakeholders and an audit of past identification schemes for the Library's constituent parts further underscored the need to harmonize the organization's image.

To achieve this goal, we believed a symbol was needed. And in fact, the Library already had a history of identifying itself with symbols based on the dome of the Library's historic Jefferson Building.

But there were a number of problems with using the Jefferson Building dome as the basis for a symbol for the entire Library. For one thing, this domed building sits across the street from a much more famous dome—

that of the United States Capitol. (The Jefferson Building dome was once gilt, but since the decision in 1931 to remove the gold leaf and allow the copper to acquire its current patina, the Capitol dome has maintained its dominance over the landscape of Washington, D.C.) Also, the shape of the dome looked like a food tray cover and was hard to recognize visually. And more importantly the dome said nothing about what the Library did or what it was all about; as a symbol, it merely said that the Library occupied a building with a dome on top.

We saw an opportunity to ditch the dome altogether and create instead a one-of-a-kind mark that carried a rich set of meanings for the Library and its myriad divisions, programs, and activities.

The solution that we came up with was a combination of an allusion to a library and a representation of the American nation: an open book and the American flag. This is a clear distillation of the core identity of the Library of Congress as the national library of the United States, and it's hard to think of any other organization for which this symbol would be appropriate.

The curves of the open pages were rendered to suggest other symbolic associations, namely life, motion, knowledge, and information flowing from a central core. The idea of a book is general enough to apply across the Library's many services and departments, which are also suggested by the stripes.

The Library of Congress has had various identifying marks, as shown below. The new trademark symbolizes the institution's role as the national library, an improvement on the depiction of the dome of the Jefferson Building that had been used in the past.





Another key part of the identity was a new wordmark. Chermayeff & Geismar recommended dropping the opening “The”—which we discovered was never an official part of the Library’s name—so that the words “Library of Congress” could be stacked as a fully justified unit to add distinction. We chose the typeface Trajan, inspired by the monumental lettering over the entrance to the Library’s Great Hall and the classic inscriptions in Rome that mark what some say is the site of that city’s great ancient libraries.

Even the greatest of libraries must periodically renew itself to remain useful to the general public. As the Library of Congress attempts to broaden its appeal at a time when the internet is fast becoming the primary source of public information, the new identity can take it beyond the physical building in which it is housed.



The symbol and wordmark are part of an extensive initiative to have various components of the Library speak in a unified voice through a consistent typographic style and the use of artistic photography featuring the spectacular art and architecture of the Jefferson Building.

LIBRARY OF
CONGRESS



It's More Than
a Library



By the time the **National Broadcasting Company** hired us in 1980, it had run into serious difficulties with its visual identity. In 1975, NBC had introduced a stylized letter *N* logo: bright, bold, and modern. But as NBC discovered to its horror, the trapezoidal design had already been trademarked by the Nebraska ETV Network. NBC ended up paying the Nebraskan network a substantial sum of money to abandon the design and transfer the rights to NBC.

However expensive and embarrassing obtaining the *N* had been, the identifier by which many people recognized NBC was the old peacock logo, which had been initially introduced in 1956 as a promotional image for color television. So in 1979, NBC decided to bring back the old peacock and superimpose it on an outline of the 1975 *N*.

Not only was this hybrid a busy and rather confusing image, it also didn't work very well as a corporate logo in various sizes and media. The peacock's feathers were small and required careful, expensive printing for even the simplest tasks, not to mention the challenges to legibility on the screen for a major television network.

The first decision we made was to get rid of the *N*. Although it had cost the network so much money and caused so much grief, it seemed completely wrong to highlight the first initial of the three-letter designation NBC, which was how everybody knew the network.

The peacock was a different story. Although in reality the peacock is a mean, nasty bird with a terrible temper, it was certainly an icon that indicated color and, by extension, color television. It also had built quite a bit of equity over the years as a representative of NBC. For these reasons, we felt that the peacock concept should be retained.

However, the rendition of the old peacock was unusable. We had to reimagine the form to make it effective. We streamlined the bird's outline, reduced the number of feathers to six, and regularized their shape. The bright colors assigned to the feathers are the primary and secondary colors of television. The peacock had been facing left—the wrong way for a reader's eye—so we flipped it to face right. Finally, we redrew the peacock so that the bird's body becomes, essentially, an upside-down feather, created in the negative space. All of these details helped make the peacock less of an illustration and more of a symbol.

The shape of the pointed *N* from 1975 is recalled in the simple letterforms we designed for the NBC name, which generally appears under the bird. Finally, a comprehensive set of guidelines putting forth rules for the proper use of the logo was developed.

At the end of this process, which was one of the most involved redesign efforts we've ever taken on, we were astonished to learn that NBC was not actually ready to adopt the new identity—not just yet. At the time, NBC was third in the rankings, behind ABC and CBS. The company was reluctant to undertake the expense of changing its signs, trucks, promotions, and so on until it was officially number one. It wasn't until 1986, six long years after NBC first hired us, that the network took the number-one slot and the new peacock was released into the world. It has since become one of the world's most recognized trademarks.



1956



1975



1979



1980

The evolution of the NBC trademark.





Date

From



Date

From

To



Date

National
Broadcasting
Company, Inc.

30 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, NY 10020
212 664 4444



Date

From

To



Date

From

To

KPOM-TV
4624 Kelley Highway
P.O. Box 1867
Fort Smith, AR 72902
501 785 2400

112 West Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
501 443 2400



Date

From

To



The simplicity of the peacock symbol allows it to be used in a wide variety of forms, from various broadcast applications to cut bronze metal shapes at the entrance to NBC's Rockefeller Center studios.

Below are a few early sketches for the peacock design.





NBC

When Chase National Bank merged with the Bank of the Manhattan Company to create **Chase Manhattan Bank** in 1955, the new company became the largest commercial bank in New York and the second largest in the United States. The new organization needed a new graphic identity to represent it effectively. The plan was to launch the new identity together with the opening of the new headquarters building, a 60-story skyscraper then under construction in Lower Manhattan.

Banks at that time generally used trademarks that grew from their initials or an image of the bank's headquarters building. Chase Manhattan briefly used an awkward combination of a map of the United States, a representation of the globe, the name of the bank, and the phrase "world-wide banking."

We became convinced that the bank would benefit from a simple symbol that could not only unite the two newly merged corporate cultures but also come to stand in for the company's unwieldy name in the public mind.

However, there is no symbol that really means banking, and no symbol that represented Chase. The new headquarters building was large and rectangular, not easily distinguished from similar skyscrapers, so we could not base a symbol on the shape of the headquarters either.

We turned to the idea of an abstract symbol, since we knew that Chase Manhattan had tremendous advertising resources that could quickly establish the symbol in the public mind.

The blue octagonal mark is abstract but not without meaning. It suggests a Chinese coin or, with the square enclosed in an octagon, a bank vault and by extension the notion of security and trust. The 45-degree angles

give the mark motion and dynamism, even a hint of three-dimensionality, yet it remains quite simple.

The presentation to the Chase Manhattan top executive board that would decide on the new symbol was quite dramatic. Two of the three top executives resisted the very idea of an abstract symbol, which wasn't surprising—at the time, no major American company used an abstract symbol to identify itself.

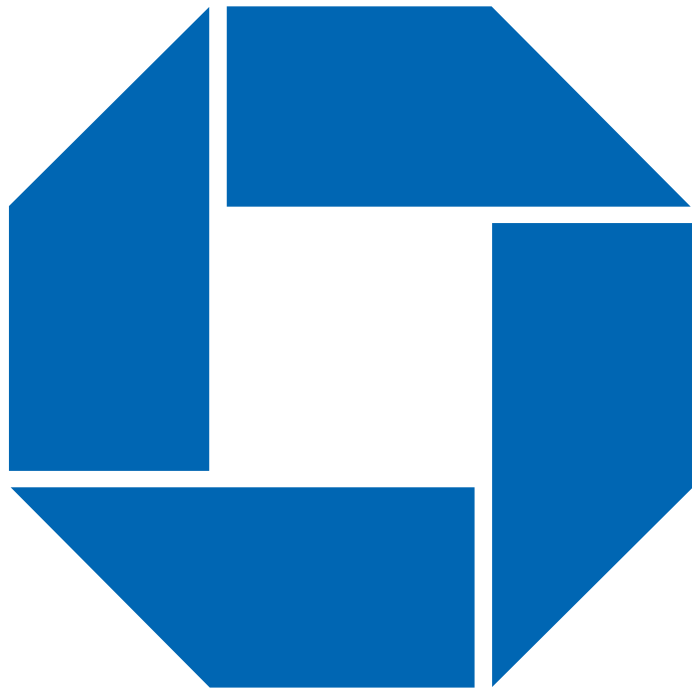
The executives then tried to brainstorm figurative design solutions. The company had recently commissioned sculptures for its new headquarters. Perhaps, one of the executives proposed, one of these sculptures could form the base of the corporate mark? The works of the sculptors in question—Alexander Calder, Alberto Giacometti, and Jean Dubuffet—would have made for an interesting, if odd, mark for a major bank. We had to explain the problems with that approach rather gently.

One of the top executives, David Rockefeller, who would soon become president and later chairman and CEO of the bank, was passionately interested in art, having come from a family tradition of art collectors. To our delight (and relief), he ultimately made the final call in favor of the octagonal symbol in 1960.

Within months, the same executives who had opposed the mark were proudly wearing it on cufflinks and tie tacks. It had rapidly become a corporate icon. We were almost astonished at how quickly and absolutely the executives had identified with the new mark. This experience has become an important touchstone for us: people can transfer their positive associations with a company onto even the most simple and abstract of designs, even if it's utterly foreign at first.

Previous trademark





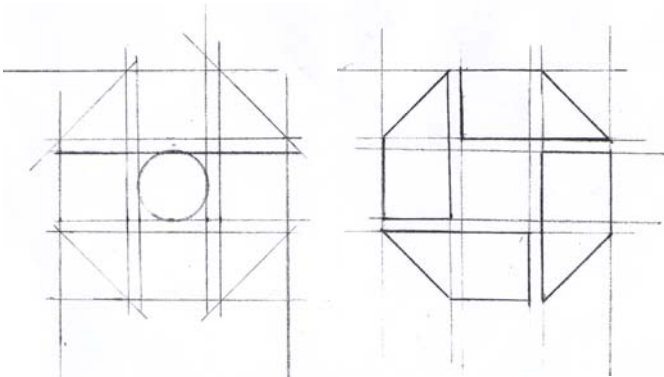


Because of various mergers and acquisitions in the past few decades, Chase has had many owners. But throughout all the changes, the octagonal symbol, the color blue, and the Chase name have been retained.

The photo at left shows the original entrance to Chase Manhattan Plaza in 1961. The photo above shows the trademark in a current, more flashy iteration.

Preliminary sketches for the Chase symbol (below left).

The simplicity of the symbol allows it to be rendered in a range of materials and forms. The three-dimensional version of the symbol shown at the right was designed for a prestigious branch on Park Avenue. Here, the dimensional forms themselves define the mark.





"Calling All Men to Barney's" was a familiar refrain to generations of New Yorkers. It was the tagline used in radio commercials advertising the famous discount store for men's and boys' clothing at Seventh Avenue and Seventeenth Street.

In the mid-1970s, some 50 years after the store's founding by Barney Pressman, the family decided that it needed to get out of the discount business and become more fashionable. Over a period of years the store was handsomely renovated and expanded to more than 100,000 square feet of retail space. High-end women's clothing was then introduced, along with stylish housewares, cosmetics, and a chic restaurant. The newly elegant store and fashionable labels required a new graphic identity that was reflective of "Barney's" change in character. This is where we came into the picture, in 1981.

Clearly, a more elegant and adaptable trademark was needed. In looking at the possibilities, we found a series of wonderful typographic coincidences. We realized that, by adding "New York" to the name, we could have two equal lines of seven characters each. To do this we had to remove the apostrophe from the "Barney's" name, as well as take out the space between *New* and

York. Removing the apostrophe turned the founder's inelegant first name into a vaguely Swedish-sounding, genteel family name, and the *New York* part read clearly, even without the space. Set in all capital letters, the two (or three) words formed a comfortable and elegant logo.

We also discovered that the *N* in *Barneys*, the middle letter, aligned vertically with the *Y* in *New York*. This came as a surprise to us, but it seemed like destiny once we noticed it. The hidden alignment was instrumental in selling the idea to Barney Pressman's son, Fred.

Arriving at this seemingly straightforward, cohesive arrangement required several subtle modifications. The spacing of the letters, the fineness of the letter stems, the width of the strokes—all these carefully considered alterations go practically unnoticed, but are essential to creating the poised, elegant, almost literary effect we wanted.

The Seventh Avenue building that housed the original store is now a museum, but **Barneys New York** has other luxurious locations across the country and overseas. With its simple, classy logotype leading the way, it is firmly ensconced as an exceedingly upscale retail establishment.

Dropping the apostrophe in "Barney's" allowed us to align the name with its home in New York. And when we did, we found NY in the middle of the two-line logotype, reading vertically.

B A R N E Y S
N E W Y O R K



Shopping bags, wrapping paper, and store awnings feature the distinctive two-line logotype to convey a sense of elegance appropriate to the offerings.

BARNEYS
NEW YORK



Merck & Co. had been a major independent pharmaceutical company for almost a century when it came to us in 1991 for an identity overhaul.

A lot of the company's problems could be traced back to its coming-of-age trauma: founded in Darmstadt, Germany, in the 17th century, Merck had an American division that was seized by the U.S. Government in 1919. That meant that the American division became its own, independent company. There were now in the pharmaceutical world two competing companies named Merck. The American Merck is known in the European market as Merck, Sharp & Dohme (MSD). The German Merck is known in the North American market as EMD Chemicals. You can imagine the confusion.

Not only was the American Merck often confused with the German Merck, but Merck also had a number of major subsidiary companies. Merck's agricultural medicine division was known as MSD-ADVET. Then there were MCMD and Merck Pharmaceutical Manufacturing, and so forth. Each of these divisions had different unrelated visual identities.

So we were hired to help Merck—the American Merck, that is—come up with a cohesive identity that would better position the company within its market, strongly relating it to its European arm, MSD, while effectively differentiating it from the German company with the same name.

This case was a classic example of a challenge that called for symbol design; indeed our solution was to create a strong, simple icon to be used consistently across the company's divisions.

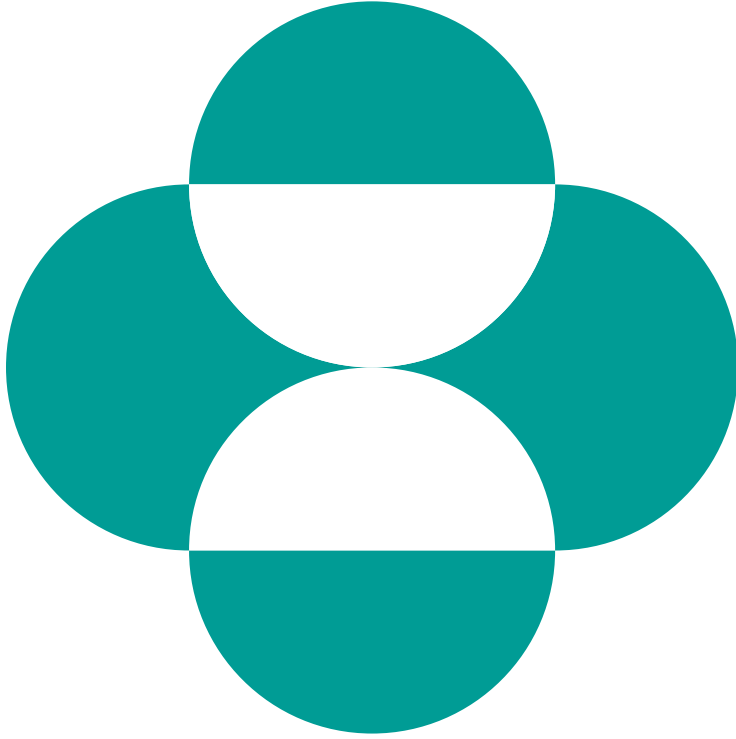
The symbol design itself suggests a multitude of appropriate ideas. It looks like a capsule overlaid with two smaller pills. The overall form is also reminiscent of a cross—a traditional marker for medical aid and pharmacies, and the basis for Merck's original visual identity. However, in its evocation of molecular compound diagrams, the mark's rounded symmetry is also very modern.

In the place of the dark green Merck had had, we recommended a bluer, lighter green, which is more distinctive and also appropriate to the medical field. But the lettering and the nomenclature still needed clarification. Together with a strategy consultant, we fixed each department's name into a standardized lockup, with MERCK in a bold logotype aligned with the mark, and the divisional name smaller and lighter beneath.

A symbol should never be a merely decorative element in an identity system. As in the case of Merck, an icon can be an irreplaceable tool for bringing together different divisions, companies, or entities with different names—even in different parts of the world. While there are other strategic reasons for using a symbol, there should always be some good reason for designing one.

Previous trademarks







The Merck symbol and lettering style, combined with a consistent way of portraying division names, presents a unified company image (facing page).

On the packaging presentation samples shown above, the Merck and MSD products are clearly from the same source.



In the early 1990s, when the **National Geographic Society** found that it could no longer rely solely on magazine advertising and books to fund its extensive scientific, exploratory, and educational work, it decided to greatly expand its product lines and distribution channels. At that point, the National Geographic Society was becoming a much broader-based organization offering a wide range of publications, television programming, films, exhibitions, travel services, and a variety of other products and services to many audiences both in the U.S. and abroad.

By the late 1990s, this explosive growth had engendered a confusing array of brands and sub-brands, with dozens of variations in form and wording. With its offerings continuing to expand, National Geographic recognized that its inconsistent use was weakening the brand's identity, and that its existing design standards had become inadequate. Chermayeff & Geismar was then retained to develop a coherent, wide-ranging graphic identity program, one that would give National Geographic a more unified and consistent system of identification and also help convey the sense of quality and substance that has long distinguished the organization.

An extensive audit, combined with limited consumer research, showed that the simple yellow border logo inspired by the trademarked cover of National Geographic magazine is a strong brand identifier for National Geographic and that the color yellow itself generates relatively strong brand recognition. It was also clear that great photography is very much associated with National Geographic and that the two words "National Geographic" are, in the public's mind, used interchangeably for the brand and for the society.

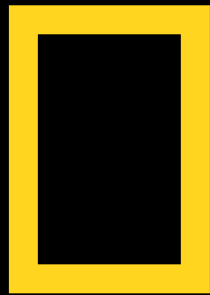
Taking all this into account, we decided, for the basic signature, to retain the existing yellow-border mark, but to standardize its form and color and to combine it with the name "National Geographic" set in a bold new, proprietary lettering style.

A clear size relationship between the two basic elements was fixed in order to establish a strong, highly recognizable graphic identity. In doing so, we also eliminated all the function and division names (except "Channel") that had previously been directly tied into the National Geographic name and instead developed a system for incorporating division names and titles separately from the basic signature and limiting their use.

Beyond the basic signature and guidelines for usage, recommendations were made for the extensive use of the color yellow, especially for product packaging; the use wherever possible of appropriate and striking photography; a standard way to incorporate a message about the society and its purpose; and how, without restrictions on layout and design, the use of strong, clean contemporary design can help update perceptions of National Geographic.

Since agencies, filmmakers, and others who use the National Geographic identity are located throughout the world, an extensive online set of guidelines was developed. These guidelines not only explain the basic rules and philosophy of the identity system, but also allow authorized users to download approved trademark variations, alphabets, and photography.

With National Geographic, our attitude was not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to retain and emphasize those attributes that the public clearly associates with the society, and to establish a simple, coherent identity system that works across a wide spectrum of product lines. The rollout of National Geographic's new identity was so seamless as to be practically unnoticeable, but the house was now in order.



**NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC**



The National Geographic "housemark" (symbol and name) is used to identify a broad range of material in a variety of media. As shown on the book covers on the facing page, we recommended that the logo be used on a dark background whenever feasible to give maximum impact to the yellow box symbol.

The National Geographic Channel is the one exception where the name can be expanded to include another word. In broadcast, the yellow box symbol alone often appears in the lower right of the screen to clearly identify the channel.



BIRDS

NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

SHARKS

NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

FROGS

NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

NATURE LIBRARY



FROGS

In the late 1950s, the Haloid Company developed the first practical copying machine, using a process dubbed xerography. Looking to identify its brand with its process, the company changed its name to Haloid Xerox. In 1961, in recognition of the commercial potential of its new products, the name was again changed, this time to **Xerox Corporation**. A new logo was developed that featured the word Xerox in thick and thin stroked letters which emphasized the diagonal thrust of the two X's and the R by giving them "tails" and placing the name above the word "Corporation."

Within a few years Xerox became one of the fastest growing businesses in the U.S. The new in-house design director, Jack Hough, asked Chermayeff & Geismar to establish an overall design attitude reflective of this dynamic, technologically advanced company.

While designing a wide variety of materials, we found the logo to be cumbersome and fussy and over a period of a couple years cut off the "tails," removed "Corporation," and made the lettering simpler and bolder. All this was done to make a cleaner, more confident and protectable mark, and it was done in a way that didn't sacrifice any of the equity that had been so rapidly established in that unique name. The result is a kind of classic mark that achieves distinction and memorability by relying more on the unusual name and the unusual combination of letters (an X at either end) than on elaborate graphics.

The company continued to expand substantially throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In some ways it was the Apple of its time, and many now-common computing technologies—such as the first true personal computer, the mouse, and the graphical user interface that formed the basis of the Macintosh system—were first developed in Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). During this time, Xerox was so far ahead of the technology curve that many of PARC's best ideas ended up being developed and exploited by others, among them the then young Steve Jobs.

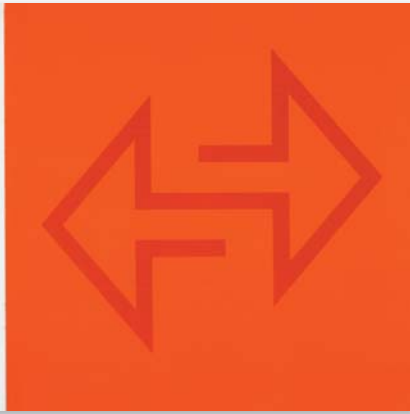
The goal of the design program was to convey a sense of excellence and clarity in all visual expressions, from letterheads to advertisements, from product identification to plant signs. To help achieve uniformity and clarity of identification, we developed an extensive set of detailed graphic standards for items commonly used throughout this increasingly international company. At the same time, to further convey the innovative spirit of the company, we undertook a wide variety of specific design projects, such as annual reports, brochures, and package designs. To each of these we brought a sense of creativity and liveliness, as these kinds of materials needed to be continually fresh and new to reflect the essence of a rapidly evolving company that helped to define the new business of communications.

Previous trademark

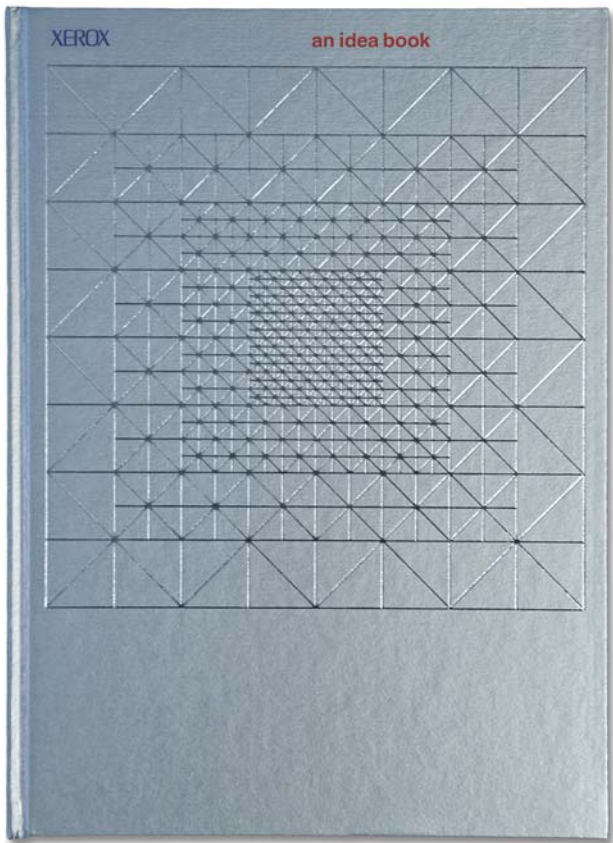
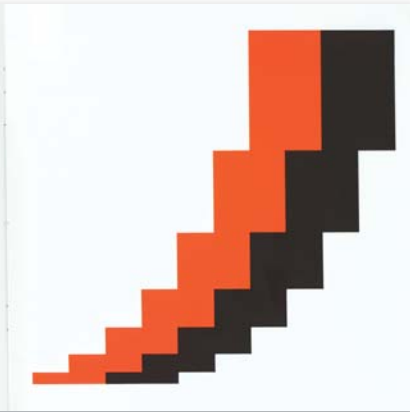
XEROX
CORPORATION

XEROX

An industrial organization demands results and Xerox can be no exception. Yet, Xerox also must search for new ideas on which to create its future. For the professional scientist or engineer these demands of new ideas and subsequently acceptable results may cause a personal dilemma. Quite often, as the professional achieves results, he is rewarded with managerial advancement. As he becomes involved in matters of administration he must necessarily move further and further away from the technical specialty for which he was originally trained.



This alternate avenue is the "dual ladder" of advancement for professional scientists and engineers at Xerox. It opens a new method of personal reward for the individual contributor — the person whose research talents and/or achievements are recognized to be of the highest order.



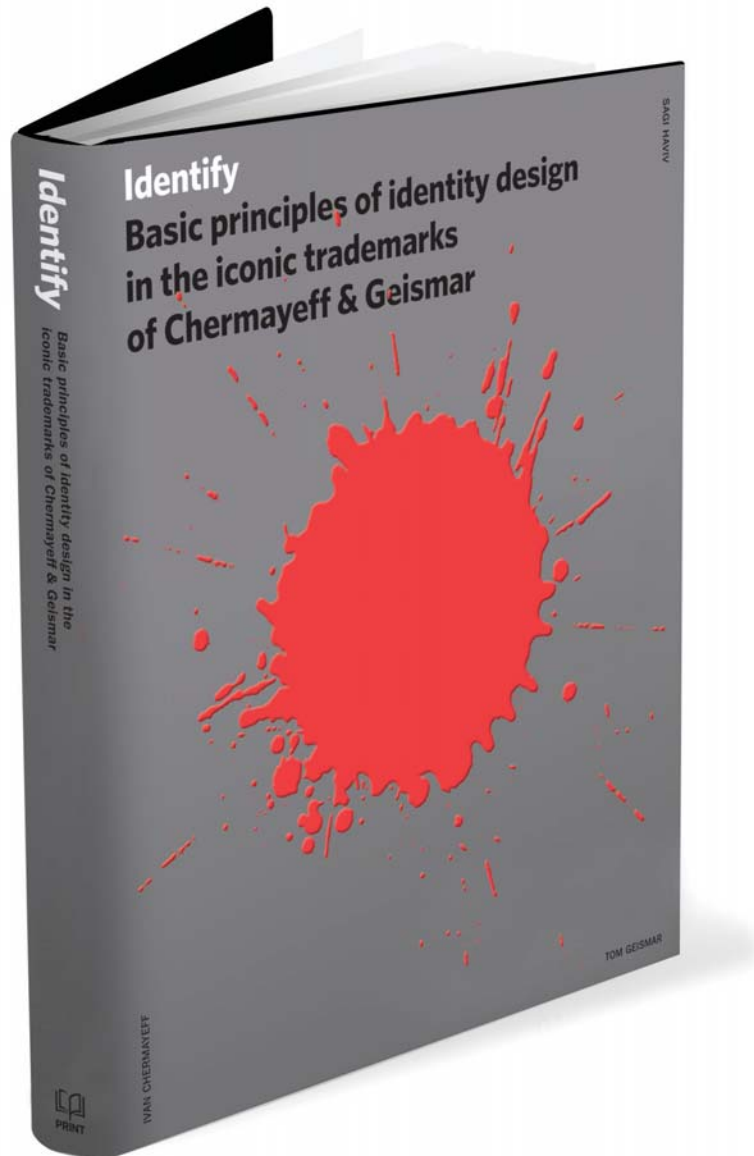
To reinforce Xerox's position as a leading technology company, many distinctive publications were developed. The example at top is from a brochure showing engineers how they could advance in the company without having to assume extensive managerial tasks. The brochure at left uses imaginative illustrations to inform various industries about how Xerox could serve them. On the facing page is an example of the illustrations, this one geared to utilities.

The only book on identity design you'll ever need.

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"Some things in life come and go, but the Chermayeff & Geismar logos are eternal." *Isaac Mizrahi*



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