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Hong Kong Trader

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The Branding Man



Henry Steiner is behind some of Hong Kong's best-known visual branding, including banking giant HSBC, the Hong Kong Jockey Club, Hong Kong Land and Hong Kong department store Lane Crawford. His ubiquitous designs are also found on Hong Kong's banknotes.

The Austrian-born designer set up Steiner&Co in 1964, three years after arriving in Hong Kong from New York for what was supposed to be a brief stint. In Six Questions, Mr Steiner explains why creating a corporate identity is all about visual communication.

Tell us about your background, and how you came to be in Hong Kong.

I was fortunate to have stumbled on graphic design. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in school, whether it was art or literature. But I saw that I could draw a picture more easily than write a thousand words. Then I realised I wasn't a fine artist. Fortunately, I had a mentor who agreed with me that painting wasn't my vocation and told me about a graphic design programme at Yale University. The programme was only three years old, so it was quite pioneering.

I came out to Hong Kong in 1961 to work on *The Asia Magazine* for nine months. That extended to two years. During that time, I did freelance work for Tai Koo Sugar, Cathay Pacific, Hong Kong Hilton. That gave me confidence that I could continue with the magazine on a retainer basis. I started developing my own clients, and it went on from there.

Why do you think your designs have stood the test of time? What do you take into account when coming up with a design for a client?

I try to put everything into practical terms. My client – who are they really? Who are their audiences? How is the client perceived? How do they want to be perceived? What's their history? What makes them unique? Where do they want to go in the future? When you get them thinking in those terms, and away from what's their favourite colour, then you can start creating visual communication that works.

I take my work seriously, and I also I love it. I put in more than I'm asked to by my clients. I don't believe in graphic design as fashion or decoration, but as strong concept – not desperately filling space without communicating an idea. So I think my brands tend to be thought through and appropriate to the clients, and I believe that's why they last.

Out of all of your iconic logos, which ones are you most proud of?

It's an awkward question, because it's like asking a mother which is her favourite child. But obviously the most visible is the HSBC hexagon, of which I'm very proud. It's universally recognised not only through its own design quality, but because the client has used it in a consistent, monolithic way, appearing intelligently on all corporate communications, large and small, and that is continually reinforcing.

Another one I like is the American Chamber of Commerce, because you don't often get a chance to revisit and enhance what you've done years before. The banknotes I've done for the Standard Chartered Bank is a series I get to update as well, introducing new themes and incorporating the latest security features. Their 150th anniversary notes was a special issue that also gave me great satisfaction.

How has having your base in Hong Kong helped raise your professional profile, especially among corporations?

There's no question I've been lucky being here during a period in which businesses grew dramatically. Hong Kong companies expanded overseas, and some of them were my clients. Tourism, hotels, property, banking. – all these began percolating from the 1960s. Hong Kong clients then tended to be more modest and were open to ideas.

With Chinese mainland corporations looking to raise their profile overseas, is this a new source of business for you?

It's the best hope we have at the moment. Hong Kong's future lies in being a services centre for China, whether it's in finance or design, in the same way that Geneva or Zurich is a services centre for Europe. We can do all of this because it's part of our tradition and we're good at it.

Our company has experience branding in China, and I want to do more because they need to develop their own intellectual property. They have to start making their products international-looking, but first marketing them domestically, refining them from that experience, and then exporting. That's the way China needs to go.

How has globalisation affected the role of a company's logo to communicate one's brand?

A brand is like a national flag. There are important values that we assign to them. Branding is crucial if you want to stand out. Part of the value of a good brand is that it endures. Too often, changes are made capriciously instead of objectively based on what the market needs. A company's logo should not be subject to whims but, instead, address the basic questions I mentioned earlier. Branding is there to help business. If you have the right brand, the longer you keep it, the better it becomes. The successful brands don't change, they become stronger.

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