



CONSUMED

Clean Look

By ROB WALKER Published: February 3, 2008

Tide

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Peter Arkle

Today will mark the first time that Tide has appeared in a Super Bowl commercial. This is a little surprising, given that Super Bowl ads are practically synonymous with mass brands and the Procter & Gamble detergent is about as mass as it gets. Indeed, the orange-and-yellow circles of its logo have that rare instant-read power that suggests not just Tide but branding in general. In a 2005 Advertising Age assessment of "brand endurance" of several well-known consumer names, Tide stood out for having increased its share of the detergent market over its long life: from 31 percent in 1952 to 40 percent more than half a century later. Last year P.&G.'s top marketing executive told Fortune that Tide is "one of our fastest-growing" brands.

Today's Super Bowl ad is not for the detergent itself but for a spinoff stain-removing product called Tide to Go. And while once there was a thing called Tide, a visit to Tide.com finds 39 different kinds of Tide: Coldwater Tide, Tide With a Touch of Downy, Tide With Bleach, Tide With Bleach Alternative, Tide With Febreze, floral scents, "mountain" scents and original scent. Recent eco-conscious variations include concentrated Tide and Tide for use with "high efficiency" appliances. All that's missing are sugar free-and menthol. While this responds to consumer demand for variety, it brings certain challenges to the iconic power that is one of Tide's marketplace strengths: namely, balancing that recognizable design with the idea of a range of choices.

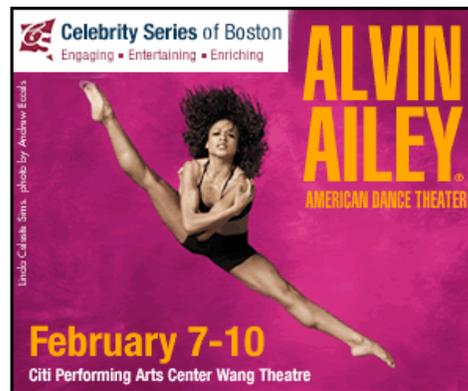
To assess the Tide logo in the contemporary marketplace, I consulted J. Duncan Berry of Applied Iconology, a consulting firm. Berry has a Ph.D. in art history from Brown and for a time taught there and at the Rhode Island School of Design, but these days his specialty is semiotic analysis of package design for consumer-product companies. What this means is that he applies the close-reading analytical skills you might associate with deconstructing a novel or a work of art to the breaking down of logos and packaging to their "constituent parts" and "indexical signs." He seems to enjoy it.

Berry noted the effectiveness of the original Tide package, which communicated "cyclone in a box," he says. "There's this great dynamic tension there. The word 'Tide' is bursting

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out of the circle, and the circle is standing out of the box. It’s almost a baroque composition; it’s like what [Steven Spielberg](#) would do if he were designing a brand.” The idea was that Tide is “a force of nature — it’s a phase shift.” After all, an effective synthetic detergent was a real innovation in 1947, a result of years of expensive research and development. The bull’s-eye look was actually borrowed from earlier P.&G. products, Dash and Oxydol. But in his memorable culture and design book, “The Total Package,” Thomas Hine noted that “some sophisticated color research” — involving a psychologist who specialized in such things — went into selecting a bright scheme that would suggest “sufficient power,” tempered with the “likable” blue that had a more “sensitive” connotation. Reaching the market just as automatic washing machines were catching on, Tide was a sensation; anecdotal accounts from the time suggest people lined up to get hold of the stuff — as if it were an [iPhone](#).

Berry’s reading suggests that it has become a lot harder to strike a visual balance in the many-Tides world. Consider Tide With Febreze, with a label that Berry compares to “an illusionistic landscape,” cluttered with many signifiers: “You have this grass that signals freshness, and Febreze sort of in the middle ground of the landscape, and Tide is like the sunset.” The problem, he contends, is that it doesn’t cohere into a message with instant emotional impact. The product 2X Ultra Tide HE presents “more of an abstract composition,” Berry continues, with the high-efficiency washing-machine icon, standing on a sort of green ribbon, casting a shadow on a Tide logo. The most noticeable thing about this more eco-aware version of Tide is that the bottle isn’t orange but a pearly hue that suggests purity. “Are people going to believe,” Berry wonders, “that Tide is going to be the power cleanser — and the soft, natural cleanser at the same time?”

Still, the sales figures suggest that even if the many Tides speak many graphic languages, sometimes garbled, something is managing to connect with disparate consumer desires. It may be the one thing that Berry found to be the strongest element of every niche Tide design: that screaming orange logo. Maybe it’s a legacy of another era, one that seems much less sophisticated than our own — but 60 years later, it’s the one visual element in all the Tide variations that still really works.

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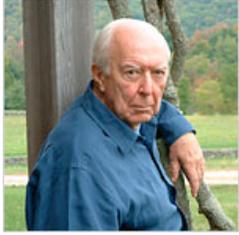
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