Gap Rebranding: Why It Failed and How To Move Forward

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Abstract

Gap clothing brand failed spectacularly when it attempted to launch a new logo in 2010. This outcome was the result of poor research, a horrible design choice, and even poorer communication. Unfortunately, this experience makes future rebranding attempts significantly more difficult. This document explores why the rebranding failed and includes suggestions for how they can do it right next time using foundational principles of marketing and psychology.

Keywords: rebranding, brand management, marketing fundamentals

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Introduction

Sometimes businesses rebrand to re-energize their offerings and often thrive afterward. Gap did not. On October 6, 2010, the clothing brand suddenly changed its logo. The move was met with extensive backlash and continued until Gap returned to its previous logo on October 12, 2010—just six days and $100 million later (Geoghegan, 2010; Mavericks, 2020). Thirteen years later, it remains one of the biggest rebranding fails in history.

Where Gap Failed

Stakeholder anger came in response to the logo change came because the company altered something many consider a constant (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Unlike just changing product packaging, logos are at the center of a consumer's cognitive representation of the brand and are often processed preattentively (Hoyer et al., 2018, p. 77). They become ingrained in our brand schemas and act as a recall cue for all the associated traits, features, and information connected to them. These cognitive representations also contain semantic and symbolic information, as well as how they apply to a consumer's life and the society they live in (Hamilton & Stroessner, 2021).

By 2010, Gap's logo was iconic. Simply mentioning the name 'Gap' triggered mental images of the preppy clothing. As a result, simply shopping at the store defined which social groups an individual belonged to and hinted at the values and attitudes that person held. This, in turn, triggered sociological responses by helping others determine their responses to someone wearing the clothing, setting expectations for the wearer based on socially learned meanings (Hamilton & Stroessner, 2021; Hoyer et al., 2018, pp. 16-33, pp.266-267). By changing its logo and direction, consumers saw the change as a threat to their identity (Hamilton & Stroessner, 2021, pp. 54-60).

These fears were only heightened by Gap's failure to clearly position its new brand image. Cognitive representations are updated with knowledge and experience expressed through marketing (Hamilton & Stroessner, 2021, pp. 129-135). Instead of updating these cognitive representations, Gap chose to "soft launch" the new logo with no publicity. They believed millennials preferred quiet celebrations to high fanfare. A quiet launch matched those preferences (Miller et al., 2014; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

Unfortunately, consumers and stakeholders equated the lack of celebration and communication with the value of the new brand. After all, if it isn't important to celebrate, it isn't important to the company or consumers (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). In other words, consumers felt that Gap had failed to properly research their decision before changing its logo.

Once Gap's new logo was live, it was too late to undo the damage, so the company did the next best thing: They told consumers that they launched the logo this way to crowdsource information on their new branding (Geoghegan, 2010; Mavericks, 2020). This response annoyed consumers who felt betrayed by a brand they trusted. Professional designers felt Gap had attempted to get free work from them. Professional marketers suspected that the logo change was a tasteless marketing tactic to generate publicity and re-energize the brand via dishonesty (Geoghegan, 2010; Mavericks, 2020; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Gap's decision to return to its original logo a mere week later only heightened these suspicions. By returning to the old logo instead of communicating, the company switched to a risk-management strategy instead of a brand communication strategy, which neither provided a path to success for the rebrand nor solved the issue of the brand needing to modernize (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

Other barriers to brand redesign are found in Miller et al., 2014:

- Autocratic rebranding approach - Imposing a redesign with little input from stakeholders.

- Stakeholder tensions - Dissonance between old management perspectives and new brand-oriented approaches.

- Narrow brand re-vision - No room to create compelling, differentiated value for stakeholders.
- Inadequate research - Failure to understand their target audience and the brand's role.
- Inadequate customer consideration - No consideration for consumer preferences.

Getting Rebranding Right

A successful rebrand involves aligning all stakeholders and communicating in a way that allows them to update their cognitive representations. Gap should have researched previous corporate rebrands, their consumers, the context around which consumers buy and wear their clothing, and the current perception of their brand. For example, while expressing displeasure, consumers expressed a deep loyalty and connection to the brand (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). As a result, consumers took control of the rebrand, becoming brand protectors. Gap corporate, however, was situated as the destroyer of the beloved brand and the "bad guys" in the situation (Miller et al., 2014). It would have had a different outcome if Gap had utilized consumers' love and loyalty for the brand in their redesign strategy.

Gap was founded in 1969 to make it easier to find a decent pair of Levi jeans. Today, the brand focuses on "...doing right by [their] customers, [their] community, and the planet" ("Gap Inc. - History," 2023). Their new logo failed to communicate any of this. A successful future rebranding campaign would require a detailed brand story. Once they create a new brand vision based on their research, they should express this and get buy-in from internal stakeholders by including them in the stories themselves. These could then be used to generate ads that show the role Gap has played in the lives of consumers and society through history and how it isn't just a constant but a leader when helping society and consumers move into the future.

There are several reasons for this recommendation: Employees live by the same social and cultural rules. Involving them in the rebranding and marketing ties the new brand to the original branding and society while getting buy-in from stakeholders and creating a personal connection. It allows Gap to communicate its goals effectively and positions itself as an element of the future in consumers' lives while gaining flexibility and agility.

Incorporating a sense of sustainability and green living in their new logo would also help. This goal could be accomplished with a series of logo updates over the next five to ten years or by changing one product line at a time. Slowly making the original logo greener and switching to a modern sans-serif font, for example, would modernize the logo while maintaining its classic look. Slowly introducing the changes would blend the consumer's need for stability and familiarity while avoiding a connection to their previous rebranding disaster. Gap should also recognize the need to continue serving Millennials while growing their market to Gen Y and Z. They could utilize their updated logos with an additional product that better fits those generations. Alternatively, clothing from the 90s is considered trendy by younger generations. Gap could utilize this trend to convert newer generations to the brand and slowly transition to more modern styles. This would allow the brand to get attention by piggybacking off an existing trend and growing a future loyal customer base while incorporating the new branding without it feeling threatening to the target market responsible for building the brand.

Conclusion

If Gap hopes to update its brand in the future, it must spend time researching how to successfully execute these strategies. It must know its consumers far better than it does and be able to avoid responding with a risk-management mindset should things go wrong. Gap would be most successful if it abandoned its autocratic brand strategy and instead involved stakeholders while communicating and targeting both new and existing target markets.

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