

From Publisher's Signet To Strong Word Mark: A Retrospective

“In general, it has now been unanimously agreed that only a word mark is appropriate for the versatile usage of the name ‘Bertelsmann’ that we are striving for.” What reads like a sentence from the minutes of a 2011 meeting about Bertelsmann’s branding is in fact more than 40 years old and is an excerpt from a memo from Reinhard Mohn. In early 1967 he had convened a working group to deal with a “consistent typographic solution for the name of Bertelsmann.” It found itself facing a question that was already crucial at the time and remains so to this day: How can the Bertelsmann brand consistently present itself to the outside world given that it is a decentralized, ever-diversifying company that is growing at an ever-faster pace? Just as the question has forfeited little of its relevance, the answers that were given at that time have lost little of their validity. Presenting: a short history of the Bertelsmann brand.

The first “Bertelsmann logo” is as old as Bertelsmann itself, and reflects the company’s identity at the time. On July 1, 1835 the printer Carl Bertelsmann founded C. Bertelsmann Verlag in Gütersloh. Its publishing program supported the religious revival movement in the Minden-Ravensberg region, and its first bestseller, “Theomele,” was a compilation of Christian songs and hymns. The publisher’s first signet featured the founding date and a reference to Psalm 24, the young company’s motto. The signet that graced every book was repeatedly modified and adapted to the times during the course of the next century or more, without ever losing the reference to the psalm - although the publishing program had long since expanded into the field of belles-lettres.

Only when this expansion entered a whole new dimension in the 1950s under Reinhard Mohn did consideration of the brand become more fundamental. As the company's business increasingly diversified, there was a growing desire to reflect this process in Bertelsmann’s public image as well. This became clear in a circular on the foundation of the “Lesering” book club of 31 May 1950. Under the “C. Bertelsmann Verlag Gütersloh” letterhead was the announcement that the *‘Lesering - Das Bertelsmann Buch’* book club was to be founded. This brought up the question of whether “Bertelsmann” and the “Lesering” should be regarded as a single entity, or did the publisher's and the club’s names contradict each other? This was initially solved through improvisation: “Lesering” magazine and later Club catalogs bore their own designs, distinct from those of the nascent group. This situation, which even then was perceived as unsatisfactory, did not change when the music and magazine business was added to the portfolio in the 1950s and 1960s.

Then in January 1967, at the suggestion of Reinhard Mohn the aforementioned working group on “uniform typographic solution for the name

of Bertelsmann” convened. By July of the same year, Reinhard Mohn’s memorandum concerning the Bertelsmann word mark reads like a preview of much later reflections on “corporate vs. consumer brands” - although these terms would not have been known at the time. From this point on, the corporate headquarters in Gütersloh used a Bertelsmann logo in sober black and white. In contrast, the various clubs at home and abroad, the Ariola label, and parts of the magazine publisher G+J initially purchased in 1969 used or developed their own brands. Even in 1975, shortly after the green “G+J” that is used to this day was introduced at Gruner + Jahr, the minutes of an Executive Board meeting record read: “The Executive Board unanimously rejected a uniform logo as this is not in the interests of the individual companies.”

Even the Bertelsmann Club, however, the division that next to C. Bertelsmann Verlag and Gütersloher Verlagshaus was most strongly rooted in the traditional notion of the “old Bertelsmann,” struggled to find the right balance between identification and differentiation. For instance, in 1979 the staff magazine “Spot” announced: “A new logo has been adopted for the word ‘Bertelsmann’ in the Club sector.” The Gütersloh graphic designer Helmut Richter was commissioned to design a consistent lettering that would, however, be closely modeled on the Bertelsmann word mark and was henceforth used for all Club publications.

As the business grew, its public relations work also expanded, and a desire arose to sharpen the public’s perception of the company. In 1982, three years before Bertelsmann’s 150th anniversary, a major image study was commissioned. Two years later this groundwork served as the basis for the first major image campaign for the entire Bertelsmann Group. In other words, the firm’s 150th anniversary can be seen as a milestone in the development of Bertelsmann’s corporate design.

As the anniversary year 1985 approached, various graphic designers and agencies were commissioned to come up with design proposals. In 1984 the decision was made in favor of green lettering based on the semi-bold “Akzidenz Grotesk” font. The word mark was expanded to include a special anniversary version that summed up the identity of the by-now international media group: “*150 Jahre – lesen-hören-sehen*” – 150 years of reading, listening, watching.

A concise form of lettering had now been found, but the increasing diversification of the company required a sophisticated communications strategy. In 1987 Reinhard Mohn defined Bertelsmann’ priorities, including in relation to the company’s image: first, a strong degree of internal pluralism; secondly, a commitment to society; and thirdly, the Group’s decentralized structure. This established the strategic direction: “Bertelsmann’s public

relations should be directed less at listeners, viewers, and readers and more at specific target groups such as journalists, opinion leaders, customers, etc.,” as Mohn wrote in an interoffice memo of 1987. This, too, reads like a description of the current corporate branding strategy, which on the outside is aimed primarily at opinion-leading target groups, rather than at consumers.

An intermediate step on the way to the “Bertelsmann - media worldwide” trademark that has been used until now is linked to company’s appearance at Expo 2000 in Hanover. Bertelsmann presented itself at the World Expo with the extraordinary and highly acclaimed “Planet m” pavilion. The compact “Planet m” logo seemed almost to be a return to the old publisher’s signet. It was part of a positively groundbreaking exercise in self-promotion, which the Group no longer wanted to forego even after the turn of the millennium. The Hamburg-based agency Peter Schmidt Studios (now the Peter Schmidt Group) was tasked with developing a new corporate design that would meet the demands of a media group that now did business around the world and in nearly all areas of the media.

Blue and orange became the new corporate colors, replacing the green. For the first time, the logo was given an orange line as a design element, and a statement about the brand with the tagline “media worldwide” – a departure from the principle of using a pure word mark. In this way, still under the influence of the boom times of the “new economy,” the company was to be positioned as a house of content with global appeal. Bertelsmann’s wholly owned divisions got new logos with the tagline “Bertelsmann,” conveying potential synergies and the image of an integrated Group. To that extent, the branding of the time already reflected the company’s strategic objectives.

Much of this has remained, and much has changed in the past ten years - most recently with the radical restructuring of the portfolio, two changes of CEO, the economic crisis – and also the death of Reinhard Mohn. In sum, these decisive events formed a turning point, which coincided with the 175th anniversary last year. And so once again an anniversary would influence the brand’s development. Even the choice of “175 Years of Bertelsmann – The Legacy for Our Future” as the anniversary motto and the development of the anniversary design should be understood against this background. The anniversary year itself revolved around retrospectives, tradition and history, but the Bertelsmann of 2011 is turned toward the future - with a new branding that reflects yet another new Bertelsmann: strong, self-confident, and poised to shape the digital world of media and services with creativity and entrepreneurship.