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## Colors could soon be corporate property

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By **TOM MAURSTAD / Media Critic**

Cattle barons in the 18th century have nothing on consumers in the 21st century – this is the age of branding. Everything and everyone is, can or should be a brand. We live in a time when "personal brand consultants" are ready to help anyone's inner-brand to bloom, when billionaire Donald Trump tried to copyright the phrase "You're fired," and Oprah Winfrey has sought trademark protection of the letter "O."

If common people, phrases and even letters of the alphabet are up for grabs in the branding wars, why should colors be allowed to glow free? Granted, laying claim to a color is tricky. There are only three primary colors (red, blue and yellow) and three secondary (orange, green and purple). Throw in brown, black and white, and that's nine. For all the variations they make possible, that's still not much when companies start staking out their color claims. Imagine a corporate turf war over who gets aubergine and who gets eggplant.

But let's forget all the subtler shades for a moment and stick to the big bold colors. Colors have heated up recently as companies have tried to brand them. Take yellow, for instance. What do you think of when you see the color yellow? Sunshine or snow?

Flowers or cowards? Whatever it is, Sprint would like that to change, so when you see yellow, you think Sprint. In a series of TV ads beginning in January for the wireless communications company, the screen is a rectangle of bright yellow.

What about brown? What do you think of when you ... oh, never mind. The point is that since 2002, UPS has been pushing hard to get you to think of UPS, adopting a campaign with the tagline "What can Brown do for you?" American Express introduced its blue card, Apple has its white iPod commercials, Target wants us all to see red. And on we go on corporate America's color-wheel merry-go-round.

"Color triggers an emotional response, and that's what advertisers want – a very quick way to stir an emotion," says Bill Ervin, vice president and creative director at Ervin & Smith, a Midwest-based advertising agency. "Words take a while for your brain to process, but colors get a more immediate reaction."

Even if we're only talking about a difference you can measure in fractions of a second, that's a big deal in a marketplace that increasingly is all about speed. Color can work fast, almost instantly, which may help to explain what's going on. As with just about every trend in advertising these days, one word is at the center of the current color craze: clutter.

We've all heard about the clutter: There's too much media, too much marketing, too much of everything coming at us, demanding our attention, trying to get us to stop, look and listen. The only answer for us poor, pummeled consumers is to just tune out, turn off and drop out – at least, as much as we can. But color can cut through the clutter and grab our attention before we have a chance to flip or click away. Take the current series of iPod commercials: The screen suddenly explodes in a swirl of neon-sherbet colors. And at the center is a black silhouette and the iPod's telltale sliver of white. You could have the sound down or just glimpse the TV from another room and you'd instantly know what it is and what it's for.

"That's one of the unique things about color – it can signal all sorts of meanings, messages or stories to you in a flash," says Jack Bredenfoerder, president of the Color Marketing Group, an international association that creates color forecast information for professionals who design and market color.

That ability has made color an increasingly popular anti-clutter device, especially on television where the clutter is compounded by the viewers' technology-enhanced control over what they watch. When the screen goes yellow during tomorrow's Super Bowl, it will be an instantaneous signal to 90 million viewers that Sprint has joined the party. An early innovator in this colorized tactic was Gap. Through much of the '90s, as Gap became known for its cutting-edge commercials, the first sign that the next 30-second show was about to begin was when the screen went white.

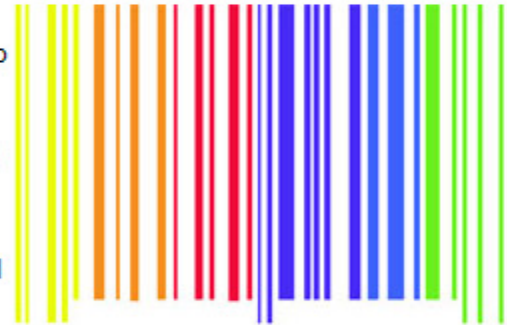
"When it's done well, as Gap did and UPS is doing," says Mr. Bredenfoerder, "color can be a very effective branding tool. But it's very difficult to own a color. You really have to commit to it a lot of time and a lot of money. And you have to have a very defined strategy of where and how you are going to see it.

"There are a lot more failures than successes."

Reflecting that fact, when you think of companies that own a color, only a handful jump out. Two at the top are UPS with brown and Tiffany with Tiffany blue. UPS has owned brown since 2002. But Tiffany has owned its blue since it chose the color for the cover of its catalog in 1878.

"I guess the secret of our success is that we stuck with it," says Dorothy Mason, vice president of the Texas market for Tiffany. "We use it in all our advertising and packaging. It's a very specific color, and when you see it, you think Tiffany. It really does tell our story."

Color us impressed.



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