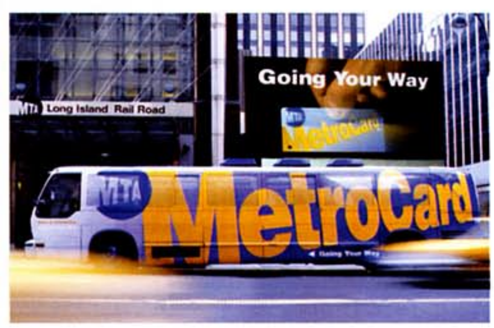
alan siegel

IDENTITY MASTER

Interview by Steven Heller

Alan Siegel, founder of Siegel & Gale, one of the leading corporate identity firms in the U.S., graduated from Cornell University in 1960 with the goal of becoming a labor lawyer. But after spending three unhappy semesters at NYU Law School, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in Germany as a first lieutenant in a Howitzer battalion. While overseas, Siegel developed an interest in photography, which he pursued upon returning to New York by signing up at The New School for two classes: Alexey Brodovitch's legendary weekly workshop, and Lisette Model's black-and-white seminar. To earn a living, he enrolled in a management-training program at BBDO, where he created packaging, sales promotion programs, and presentations for all of the agency clients. Following a year at the PR firm Ruder & Finn, he joined Sandgren & Murtha, a design-firm spin-off of Lippincott & Marguiles—his first introduction to the world of corporate identity. Before long, Siegel and fellow Sandgren designer Bob Gale set off to open a firm of their own (Gale eventually left the firm). The competition—Lippincott, Saul Bass, Chermayeff & Geismar, Landor, and Ansbach Grossman Portugal—was formidable in the '60s. But Siegel & Gale, now celebrating its 35th anniversary, has outlasted a few. Siegel, 67, built S&G on a desire "to push the envelope beyond traditional corporate identity, which was pigeonholed around design." In this interview, Siegel critiques the branding profession and addresses how he continues to practice good old "C.I." while looking into the future.

HELLER: I was recently reading a 1923 booklet called "The History of the Trademark" that was promoting the then-unlabeled branding field. The booklet is full of pseudoscientific bromides about brands (and branding) changing the face of American marketing. How do you feel the branding profession has progressed since those early days? SIEGEL: I have always been upset by the brand craze, because I believe that large corporations are more than a brand—or to put it another way, not *just* a brand. They are an employer, an investment, and, hopefully, a responsible member of society. I also feel that creating branding programs is still more an art than science. The overcommercialization of branding has caused a backlash.



Advertising agencies, branding firms, research firms, management consultants and others have fueled a branding craze that has gotten out of hand. Everything is a brand. There is so much noise and visual pollution from brands—it's out of control. HELLER: You have doubtless heard the critics who question why a logo should cost so much, and specifically why certain very simple solutions, like tilting the *E* in Dell [S&G, 1992], are right, while other solutions are wrong. How do you define the success of a brand and a mark, and why are certain simple or simplistic design decisions made over others? SIEGEL: In creating a visual identity for our clients, we first have to consider any equity there might be in the current trademark. You don't want to throw away a design that has high recognition, emotional appeal, and a comfort level with employees, customers, and other constituents. It's also hard to create a trademark without working from a strategy that provides the conceptual framework to create something that is distinctive and relates to the company. The tilted *E* in the Dell logo, for instance, grew out of the idea that Dell was "turning the computer industry on its ear" by selling custom-made computers direct to the consumer. The best trademarks are simple, but selling simple solutions can be difficult. HELLER: Who is the best person within a business to judge an identity program? SIEGEL: Most corporate executives don't feel comfortable evaluating designs. In order to get them to do so, you must show them alternatives, demonstrate how the trademark and visual identity system will transform their current materials, and in some instances, use research to show that there are not hidden problems that will embarrass them. But many senior executives have no taste, are frightened of making a statement, or show the designs to their family and come back with suggestions that are nonsense. HELLER: What determines whether your mark is a word, monogram, or image? What, for example, was the rationale for MasterCard's Venn diagram logo, or [the New York City MTA] MetroCard's vanishing point? SIEGEL: The MasterCard Venn diagram was created for security reasons and to

accommodate putting a stamp or seal on cards that take on the identity of the member bank. The MetroCard's vanishing point was designed to suggest a speeding subway train. As a general rule, we try to create powerful, simple, distinctive trademarks that can be used as part of a system, that can maintain their integrity in large, small, or adverse reproduction environments. But we never let these constraints stand in the way of creating something unique. **HELLER:** Speaking of unique design decisions, there was some controversy on the design blog Speak Up over your rebranding of the New School University in New York. Your new system for identifying the unique and distinct colleges within the university is much more efficient. But your design shift goes from a somewhat classical university visual gestalt to a more hipster type treatment. What is the reason for the blurry and distressed letters? **SIEGEL:** The New School is not a classical university: It doesn't have a campus, student union, library, athletic teams, or very many dorms. The design communicates the nontraditional character of this urban university and its rich history of social activism. It's an environment where the faculty and students challenge the status quo and convention. This graffiti character to the design is essentially a timeless metaphor for personal expression. **HELLER:** Paul Rand is famously quoted as saying the logo is only as good as the company behind it. His Enron logo is a case in point; it has become a symbol of corruption. Have you ever branded a company only to learn they had a past or present that was not on the up-and-up? **SIEGEL:** We have worked for two companies that were real problems: The Silverado Savings & Loan in Denver, one of the largest institutions in Colorado until its infamous demise in 1988; and the now-bankrupt Centrust Savings in Miami, which counted among its officers David Paul, who used bank funds to support an opulent lifestyle, and Neil Bush, the youngest son of George H.W. Bush, who approved $100 million in loans to his close business associates. Both banks were run by dynamic, high-profile businessmen who ended up in jail. The government's case against Silverado was very complex. To help make their case, Silverado hired our simplification group to explain their position in terms the jury and media could understand. It didn't help. **HELLER:** Do you try to determine whether your clients have such pasts? **SIEGEL:** Through business profile and reputation, we can learn in advance if there is a potential problem. But who could have predicted that Arthur Andersen would have imploded so quickly, or that the CEO of Tyco was plundering the company's resources for personal gain? **HELLER:** What is the hallmark of a 21st-century brand? Is it different from the 20th-century brand? **SIEGEL:** As we moved into the 21st century, corporate executives realized that a successful brand must be built around a brand promise that grows out of the "truth" of the organization; is clear, credible, and relevant; and provides direction and insights for the employees in creating communications and interfacing with customers, distributors, stockholders, the media, and other core constituents. It must pay careful attention to deliver the brand promise at critical touchpoints with their constituents; provide consistent reinforcement of the brand promise in integrated media programs; and be resilient and flexible to the fast-changing business environment. Further, it must actively support social programs that are critical in the countries and communities where the company does business; and build meaningful relationships with customers. **HELLER:** What are these meaningful relationships? Are they tested concepts or risks that the business engages in with the hope that the customer will benefit? **SIEGEL:** Remember Chase's recent ad campaign "Relationships Are Everything"? Chase was expressing the value proposition to both customers and their financial services firms about what results from a long-term relationship. Obviously, the bank will improve its profitability by garnering the largest possible "share of wallet" from its customers. Those people believe in Chase and have confidence in its products and services. Likewise, customers should realize more personal service, lower fees and service charges, and access to new products and services by building a relationship with Chase rather than spreading their money around to other companies. When you are investing in building a brand, you must ensure that you deliver the brand promise at every critical point of contact if you want to build brand loyalty and a meaningful relationship with your customer. These days, this might even mean being proactive. Send customers an annual report or make new, valuable information available to them on your Web site. Learn more about them so you can customize your service and communications. **HELLER:** What about the next 35 years? How do you foresee S&G progressing? **SIEGEL:** These days it's hard to forecast more than two years or even six months. But my thoughts are that we will intensify our programs and staff to simplify communications; we will concentrate on helping our clients develop their brand voice; and we will acquire companies that specialize in public relations, crisis management, direct response, and technology delivery systems so we can provide turnkey programs for the brand voice. We will also continue to develop innovative technology programs that assist our clients to effectively implement, monitor and evaluate brand programs; we will continue to emphasize and invest in building our Internet services; and we will open offices in Europe and Asia to serve our global clients and generate new opportunities.