



SIGN
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Star Signs

How brands can use cultural
insight to navigate the stars

December 2021

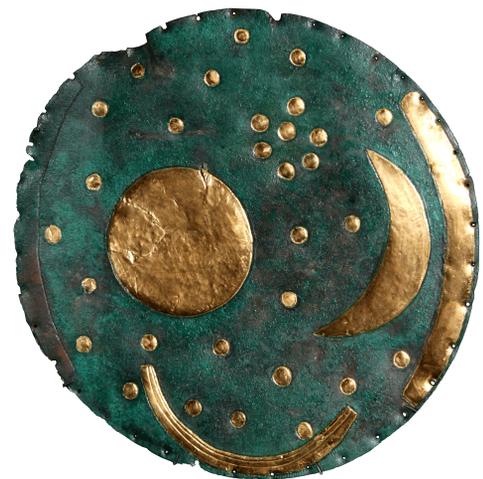


Intro

Found on top of trees, hanging outside houses or adorning gifts, stars are closely associated with Christmas. While such customs have their origin in the Star of Bethlehem believed to have signalled the birthplace of Christ, the historical and contemporary significance of the star as a symbol extends considerably further.

Long before their association with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, stars already held deep mystical and practical importance for humans. This is evidenced, for example, by the Nebra Sky Disc (right), a star map discovered in Germany widely believed to date from the Bronze Age. Inscriptions discovered in Iraq and dated to 1700 BC comprise the earliest firm evidence of constellations later used by the Greeks.

Across cultures, the earliest human encounters with stars were accompanied by a sense of wonder at these mysterious, seemingly unreachable objects suspended in the sky. It is therefore of little surprise that they became associated with divine, otherworldly power.



Above: Nebra Sky Disc c. 1600 BC

In turn, it is not difficult to imagine why brands have tapped into the semiotic value of stars.

In this report, Sign Salad traces the trajectory of the star as symbol, exploring the ways in which its surprisingly multifaceted and evolving meanings can be put to effective use in both premium and mass market commercial contexts.

Top Images (Clockwise): Clay Tablet depicting Constellations (Iraq), 650 BC; Big Dipper, Temple of Esna (Egypt), c.250 AD; Halley's Comet (Ottoman Empire), c.1470-90; Starry Night over the Rhone, Van Gogh, 1888; The Duan Hang Star Atlas (Map 5), c.705 AD; Clerks Studying Astronomy and Geometry (France), c. 15th C.



Stars as Awe-inspiring Wonder

From the earliest times, the dazzling magnificence of stars in the night sky has been a universal source of awe, inspiring countless myths and providing glimpses of almost inconceivably divine or supernatural power.

One area of culture in which stars have been consistently linked to magic and wonder is the world of film and television – from naming conventions (Starz Channel and Disney’s Star), to representational logos (such as Disney, Paramount, and Hanna-Barbera’s).

In the Disney opening shot, for example, a glittering beam of stardust arcs around the brand’s famous castle, situating it as the heart of modern myth. Within the films, magic itself is visibly depicted as a starry trail of glittering stars with transformational properties. Similarly, Paramount encircles the Olympus-like centre of its film universe in a sweeping halo of stars, whilst Hanna-Barbera features a swirling white star trailed by multi-coloured beams

These examples reveal a common representational trope: many brand logos represent stars dynamically traversing space, accompanied by a tail. It is precisely in its form as a shooting star that the star becomes a semiotic vehicle for conveying magic and wonder. Unlike the dependable yet ordinary static star, the shooting star is an ephemeral anomaly. The few short seconds a shooting star reveals itself is a wondrously rare and momentous moment, establishing the shooting star as a rare and special celestial being.



Acqua

Chinotto

S. PELLEGRINO

Stars as Symbols of Premium Quality

As celestial bodies, sitting high above the mundanity of terrestrial life, stars naturally lend themselves to representing excellence and exceptionality – both in the visuals we use (e.g. pentagrams), and in our language (“stellar”).

In 1844, the Baedeker Guides cemented the star’s meaning as a commercial symbol of ‘quality’, by introducing a system of star points to rate hotels and points of interest. This notion of “stellar” quality was later capitalised on by Italian companies in the 19th century, as they began to place red stars on export labels as a shorthand for ‘high quality’ products, giving way to the now-iconic San Pellegrino logo.

Today, the pentagrammic star has become an ubiquitous signifier of quality and premiumness across FMCG/CPG brands, particularly in the beverage category. Positioned centrally on-pack, the five-pointed star also acquires a heraldic quality that imbues the brand with prestige and a sense of heritage.

Yet not all stars are the same: where San Pellegrino, Pret and Estrella’s stars communicate sophisticated quality - Macy’s, Heineken and Star signal the brands as somewhat less premium.

Hue, form and printed finish affect the perceived quality of stars in these examples. While San Pellegrino and Pret use complex, secondary red tones, Macy’s and Heineken use bright primary red, associated with simplicity.

Similarly, where Estrella (Spanish for ‘star’) uses a minimal metallic sheen and old-gold tone to communicate elegant simplicity, Nigeria’s Star beer uses high-shine gloss and bright yellow-gold, compromising its perceived premiumness.

So, while stars stand as potent symbols of quality, there exists a hierarchy of premiumness within them, determined by subtleties of visual design - much like Baedeker’s system of star points.



Stars as Scintillating Kitsch

While numerous brands have harnessed the semiotic power of stars to connote premium quality and elegance, we also see widespread use of the star in less grandiose contexts. Take, for example, The Daily Star, soap stars, porn stars, S Club 7's 'Reach for the Stars' or White Star cider, a high-strength, low-cost alcoholic beverage – suddenly, we find ourselves in a somewhat different, yet no less culturally important, galaxy.

Interestingly, what is fundamentally the same symbol used for premiumness can function as an equally effective marker of a more everyday kind of stimulation and enjoyment. Through a different aesthetic approach, stars can embody the kitsch, dazzling theatricality upon which the likes of reality TV, the tabloid press and pop stars thrive. In light of this, budget brands such as White Star are not so much seeking to convey premium quality but rather tapping into the function of the star as a signal of energetic, sparkling intensity and fun that sits slightly closer in reach to planet earth.

Examples of how brands visually convey this more accessible form of sensational appeal include a Las Vegas-style of intense luminosity and dynamism, a prevalence of glitzy or 'precious' colours (gold, silver and purple) and a playful, sometimes asymmetrical freedom with regard to how stars are composed.





3 Brands Getting it Right

Case Studies on how to navigate the stars



Gucci: Stars as Elevated Kitsch

Gucci, a brand firmly established in the collective conscience as synonymous with sophisticated opulence, knowingly re-appropriates the asymmetrical glitzy star in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In its most recent collection, Gucci identifies the irregularly-drawn, larger-than-life five-point star as an embodiment of 1970s kitsch, which aptly provides the brand with an opportunity to playfully marry retro popular culture with high fashion. Indeed, this playfully ironic use of the star reflects the increased relevance of camp aesthetics within the luxury space (note the Met Gala's camp ball, 2019).

The star also positions Gucci as boldly and playfully open-minded towards culture as a whole, and as drivers of creative cross-fertilisation between premium and mass-market, the A-list and the everyday. In doing so, Gucci averts the risk of resting on their laurels and being viewed as a stagnant, self-important brand that is unwilling to experiment and out of touch with wider culture. In an era where streetwear has become haute-couture, Gucci's star is the perfect symbol of the increasingly blurred lines between 'high' and 'low' culture.

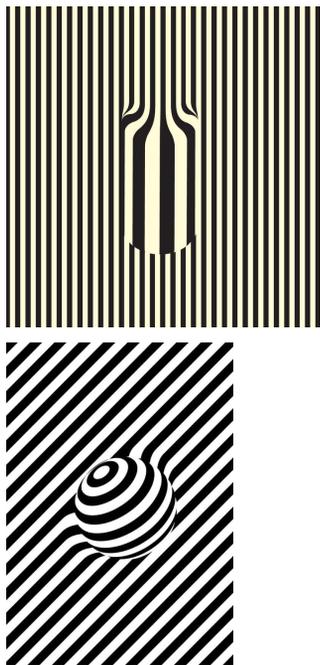


0.00000 BEER



LIGHT
FRUITY
BEER

A FRESH TAKE ON BEER



Free Star: Stars Reimagined

Free Star beer provides a strong example of innovation in commercial usage of the star. The brand has taken the star as a ubiquitous and therefore somewhat stale indicator of premiumness and, through a number of key visual design tweaks, breathed new life into this symbol. Being 0% ABV and gluten-free, as a product Free Star is inherently something of a disruptor in the alcohol category and has embodied this sense of bold deviation in its pack design, ultimately establishing a confidently distinct brand identity.

By replacing the typical five-point star with a considerably rarer eight-point design, it gives the symbol an explosive, dynamic quality that breaks free from the static, two-dimensional depictions of stars commonly used in the alcohol category. This is further enhanced through the star's slightly off-centre positioning and slanted tail energetically cutting through an orderly, striped background, conveying a sense of rocket-like upward motion and three-dimensional depth reminiscent of optical illusions. As the ascendant star blasts through gravity to escape the mundane, in parallel the brand breaks rank with celestial clichés.



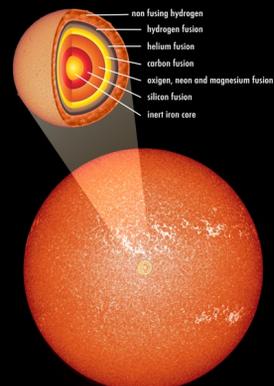
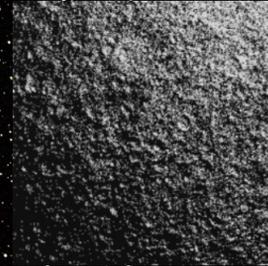
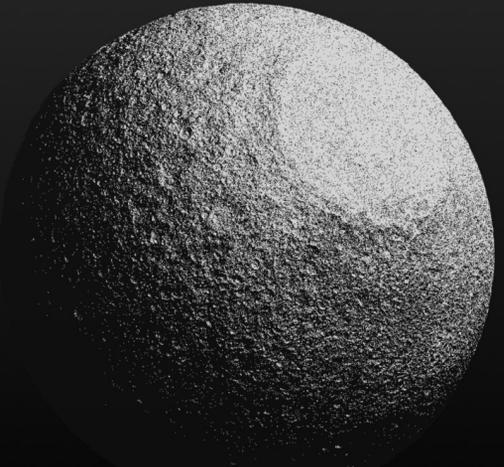
Co — Star

Co-Star: Stars as Science

Since its launch in 2017, astrology app Co-Star has managed to tap into the increased interest in astrology and wider aspects of spirituality among millennials and Gen Z, whilst also grounding itself in scientific data. Its USP lies in that it uses celestial data derived from NASA to provide users with personalised horoscopes mapped to the precise time and place of users' births, thus giving its bespoke predictions a sense of scientific rigour.

This is reflected in Co-Star's departure from the conventional depictions of stars within commercial astrology. Its logo distinctively represents the star as a luminous 3-D sphere in precisely rendered detail (in contrast to more popular 2-D angular shapes). The star as sphere becomes an instant communicator of the brand's technological expertise and evidenced-based knowledge, distancing it from astrology's associations with subjective, pseudo-scientific insights at the hands of a human seer.

Co-Star's luminous sphere also reveals a fundamental shift in our understanding of stars. As science has brought humans closer to the stars than ever before, notably through the space race of the mid-twentieth century, and the commercialisation of space travel in 2020 and 2021 (with the first-ever movie filmed in space just this year!), it has also changed our understanding of their physical properties. Co-Star shows itself ahead of the game, recognising that as we get physically closer to stars, their associations with magical myth and mystery will become less culturally relevant, necessitating a rearticulation of how we visually represent and conceive of them.



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Key take-outs

Deep-diving into the cultural and commercial meanings of the star reveals crucial learnings, whose relevance extends beyond both the constellations and Christmas. As commonplace symbols become diluted in their meaning, relevance, and impact, it's important for brands to identify ways of breathing new life into such hackneyed signs, ensuring optimum cultural relevance and complete control of the meanings communicated.

1

Re-contextualise hackneyed symbols, marrying low-brow and high-brow culture to give your brand playful ironic appeal, pushing it into the leading-edge.

2

Be disruptive by redesigning standard category symbols, drawing inspiration and cues from other, unexpected categories.

3

Stay relevant by considering the changing meaning of the actual entity a symbol denotes, and reflect these shifts in your design.

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**Thank you
& all the best for the festive season.**

Sign Salad is a cultural insight agency, specialising in semiotics and language analysis. Please feel free to get in touch with us at hello@signalsalad.com

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