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SENDING A SIGNAL or "FLAGS 101"

...by Richard R. Gideon

Sometimes it is necessary to go back to the basics. In this article we will discuss that most basic of "vexillological" questions: "What is the function of a flag?" Recent exchanges with one major company, a couple of families, and a non-profit organization brought home to this author that what we sometimes take as obvious isn't necessarily so amongst those outside the world of flag design and flag history.

THE PURPOSE OF A FLAG IS TO SEND A SIGNAL

Regardless of how one may perceive it, the purpose of a flag is to send a signal. One does not display a flag in the hopes that it will be ignored. One displays a flag with the expectation that others will see it and, perhaps, respond to it. The "flag as signal" is not only the traditional view of the purpose of a flag, it is the only logical conclusion one can come to for its existence in the first place. National flags send the signal of nationality; military flags announce the existence of a unit, mark the position of leaders, indicate medical facilities, or any number of specialties; a company flag signals goods, services, or food is available here. In all these cases the flag is seen, the viewer interprets the design, and information is transmitted.

THE DESIGNER ESTABLISHES THE MEANING OF A FLAG

Before a flag is displayed with the expectation that it will elicit a reaction it must be "reacted upon." In other words, a designer or perhaps a group of designers must agree upon the motif. It is at this point that good intentions often go awry. What looks good to one person may dissatisfy another. Much has been written about flag design, and it is human nature to dismiss the opinions of others on matters of "art," but there is little question that many flags simply do not do a good job of signaling, often because they are overly complicated. When a designer has done his job properly the final product needs little explanation. A good example is the McDonalds Restaurant flag; a red field with the well-known "golden arches." Flown from a tall pole, it is a familiar sight along American Interstate Highways, and is often seen well before the restaurant itself. Flags such as the McDonalds flag send detailed information to a viewer. If the restaurant displayed only an American flag the signal's efficacy would be severely diminished. The American flag signals nationality, but within the nation itself that signal may be too broad to be of value, especially to a hungry traveler. But add the restaurant flag to the mix, and the signal now is more easily understood.

THE FLAG'S SIGNAL MUST BE TAUGHT

When the first “stars and stripes” appeared in America it may well have been a source of mystery to many people; a fact not lost on the founding fathers. Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Congress, sent out explanations of our nation’s colors to the newspapers of the day so that the flag might be properly interpreted; i.e., the signal would be understood as the designer(s) intended it. It is true that in some cases the design of the flag carries a great deal of self-explanation, as we have adverted in the design of the McDonalds Restaurant banner, and flag designers strive (or should) for this type of recognition. But in most cases the flag’s design needs to be taught. For an example, a flag of three horizontal stripes – red, white, and red – could be a Navy signal for the number 6, or it could be the Austrian Flag. The size, shape and context help define the signal; for example, a US Navy ship would not be using such a flag to indicate its own nationality. “Context” cannot be overemphasized. Raise an American flag upside-down and a completely different signal is sent – one of distress. Many nations with asymmetrical flags adopt this method of signaling. But even a properly displayed flag may be viewed differently, depending upon its context. A person may see an American flag displayed on his neighbor’s house and think nothing of it. That same individual, as a Navy person treading water in a hostile ocean and seeing a ship come upon him, will have an entirely different reaction if that ship is flying an American flag. In both cases the flag’s signal is one of nationality, but the context makes one more welcome than the other.



The Service Flag shown in this photo sends a signal - "I have two family members in the military." The key word is "have" - not "had" or "will have" - and those who have been taught the signal understand the meaning of the flag

Some flags send universal signals in that they are understood almost anywhere in the world. An example of this is the "Red Cross" flag, also known as the FLAG OF THE GENEVA CONVENTION. A white field with a red cross of equal arms, this flag is used to indicate that medical help is available. The fact that the flag is used over a large portion of the globe indicates that its meaning has been taught to a great many people. But the "Red Cross" flag is one of two flags falling under the title "Flag of the Geneva Convention." The other, less well known flag is the "Green Cross" flag.



The "Green Cross" flag has the same aspect ratio as the more familiar Red Cross flag, but it sends the signal that "veterinary help is available." Thus the Green Cross flag is for animals, or perhaps it should be said that it lets people know that care is available for animals. This flag is one of many signal flags used by the U.S. Army. The Army has one of the largest veterinary systems in the world, providing care not only to military animals (the Army still has horses, and a canine corps) but to pets of military dependents and medical care to indigenous animals in foreign countries.

Let us summarize what we have adduced so far:

1. THE PURPOSE OF ANY FLAG IS TO SEND A SIGNAL
2. THE DESIGNER ESTABLISHES THE MEANING OF A FLAG
3. A FLAG'S MEANING MUST BE TAUGHT

EXAMPLES

Here are some example signal flags; some well known, and others less so. In each case, however, a message is being sent.



This flag belongs to a marine company



Here is a Union Field Hospital flag



A flag representing the U.S. team at the Olympic Games



The State of Texas, one of the most recognized state flags



A legendary signal flag - one of the many Pirate flags of history

If you recognized any one of these flags it is because you have been taught its meaning. Each flag shown displays its symbolism for all to see; it is up to the flag scholar to present the case for any particular flag so that its meaning will be known.