



Color and your brand

How do your color
palette choices impact
your visual branding?

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So, you have a new brand?

That means you need a new color palette.

Whether it's a corporate identity, a product brand or something in between, color is an integral component in bringing a new brand name and logo to life. But where to start? Pantone's widely-used color matching system identifies nearly 2,000 different colors – that's a lot to sort through. You may have a favorite color, or one that you think works well for another brand, but how do you figure out what will work well for your brand?

To determine where to begin, there are four key questions you'll want to answer. To help break them down, we'll look at three different (and completely fictional) brands and the factors their brand teams will need to consider:

- **Sonus**, a B2B tech company formed by a recent merger
- **Plain & Simple**, an existing private label laundry detergent looking to rebrand
- **Swap**, a new digital payment app

Now that the table is set, let's get on with it.



In what industry or market will your brand compete?

This is the most basic question and one you should already be familiar with if you've landed on a brand name. B2B technology, household cleaning product and digital app markets bring different needs to the table, a concept that carries through to the color palette:

Sonus, the B2B tech company, will be in a space that values looking both modern and reliable. Sort of cool, calm and collected. That lends itself, naturally, to the cooler side of the color wheel – primarily blue, but potentially other similar colors.

Plain & Simple, the private label laundry detergent, doesn't have any industry cues. Laundry detergent is generally either white or translucent, which doesn't offer much direction. Additionally, Plain & Simple isn't specifically a natural or organic detergent, so green isn't an obvious choice, either.

Swap, the digital payment app, is only available in the U.S., which means it has one obvious market connection: the color of money. A connection like this doesn't always mean green is the best choice, but it's often a part of the consideration and discussion.

Who are your primary competitors?

After exploring general color associations with your industry or market, it's time to get a bit more specific in this line of research, and that means looking at your primary competitors. "Primary" is a key word here – the wider your scope, the more noise you'll need to filter out. Ideally, keep your list of competitors to three, and certainly no more than five. In addition to looking at which color associations your competitors have, you'll also want to take note of how strong those associations are.

Sonus will likely have a wide range of competitors, but the three the brand team is most concerned with are Cisco, IBM and Avaya. Cisco is a well-known company, but their logo color palette, featuring red typography with a dark blue logo mark, is less familiar. IBM, on the other hand, has an iconic logo and has maintained a consistent color palette for more than 40 years. Given the brand equity and consistency, this rates as very strong. The third competitor is Avaya – not as well-known as Cisco or IBM, but with the type of logo that makes you say "Oh, I've seen that before." The visual brand really works to own red, which increases the strength of the connection.

Plain & Simple is part of a crowded marketplace (quite literally, as we'll discuss later.) Again, narrowing down the list of competitors is important. Tide is the industry leader, and they OWN orange – a very strong connection. ALL uses both white and blue as primary colors, which dilutes their individual color strength a bit. Downy also uses blue, and on one hand, it's a bit more consistent than ALL; on the other hand, it's not a particularly memorable blue. Gain may not quite have the name recognition that some of the other competitors do, but it has staked a claim to green, and a bright, vibrant green at that.

The strongest color association among **Swap's** competitors belongs to Apple Pay. When you see a solid white background with clean, black typography, you think Apple – and that carries over to Apple Pay. Venmo and Zelle (formerly ClearXchange) both use blue, which is commonly associated with banks and financial institutions, but not unique or particularly memorable on its own.

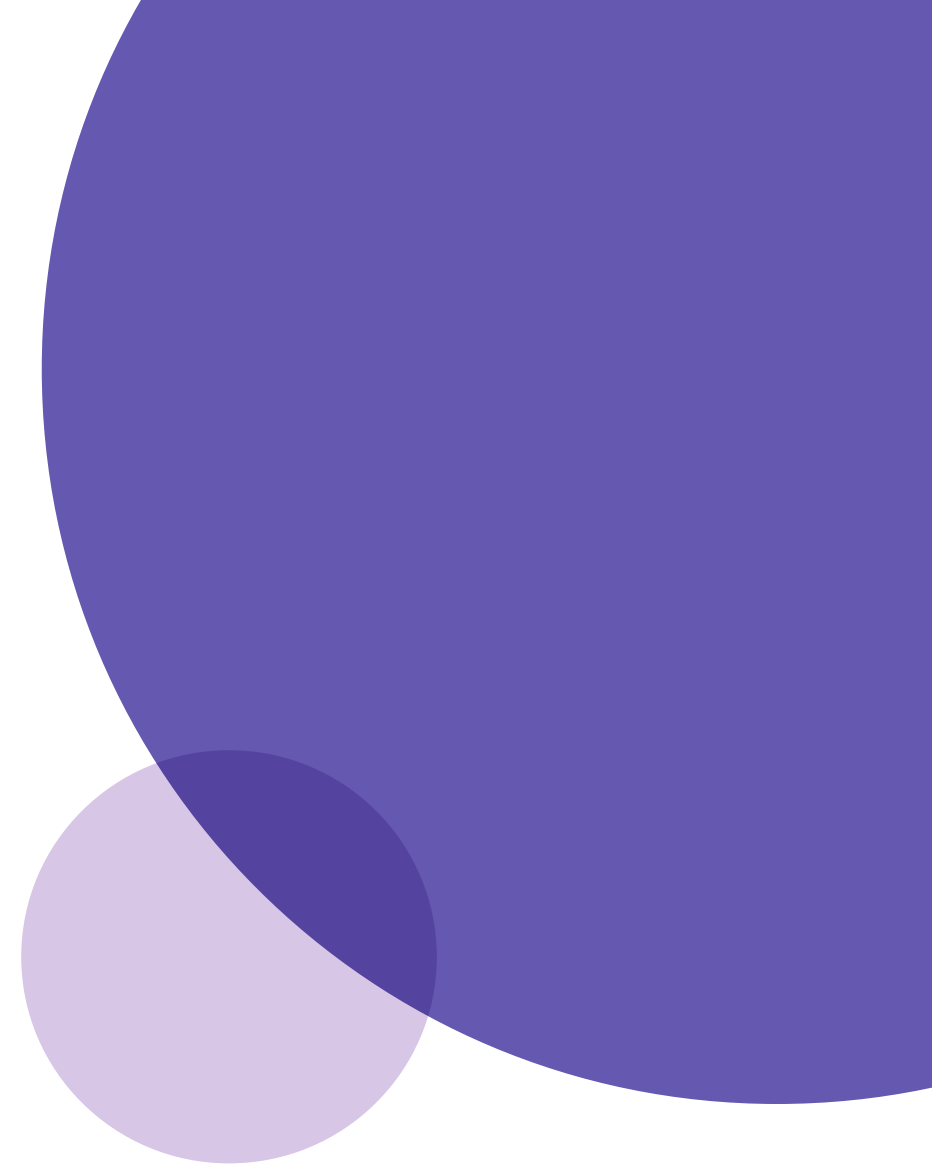
How do you fit within the existing competitive landscape?

So you're aware of the market you're in and the competitors you're up against, but where do you fit in? Are you looking to maintain an established presence, or are you the young upstart looking to disrupt the hierarchy and steal market share?

Being born from a merger of two established companies, **Sonus** may want to look at any brand equity that might carry over. If it's positive, the brand can take advantage of it; if not, the team can purposely pivot away from it. Or perhaps they land somewhere in between, choosing a new primary color but selecting certain secondary colors as a nod to their legacy.

As a private label brand, **Plain & Simple** needs to find a balance between differentiation and assimilation in the space. This product won't have the name recognition of its competitors, so the color palette will need to clearly communicate what it is, which likely means "fitting in" to a degree. That being said, a certain level of differentiation will still be required, as the brand team will want to avoid looking like an "off brand" for one of the industry leaders.

Swap is the prototypical upstart, looking to upend the more established, better-funded giants that currently rule the space. The team knows they need to make a splash and grab people's attention, by whatever means necessary. Above all else, they need to maximize differentiation.



Where will your brand be seen?

Color is a purely visual element. So, where will your visual brand actually reach your target audience's eyeballs? If there are multiple touch points, it's important to prioritize them.

Sonus will mostly exist as a stand-alone brand. The target audience won't regularly see the logo directly next to competitors' logos, either on screen or in print. Therefore, they don't necessarily need it to "jump out." However, the brand be relying on more long-term color association and brand loyalty, so the team does need to ensure that there's no confusion with any of the companies they're up against.

For **Plain & Simple**, it's a completely different story. Physical retail spaces are filled with crowded shelves, and individual products need to be noticed. It's imperative that Plain & Simple's packaging is identifiable, whether to attract new customers or to make it easy for returning customers to locate it on shelf.

Swap also needs to stand out among a crowded field, but in a different way. Users aren't selecting apps from a physical shelf or even from a digital shelf in most cases – it's after the initial download that matters. Within the confines of a mobile phone screen, it's important that users can quickly and easily identify a specific app against both competitors and other, unrelated apps.

What direction will your color palette take?

Sonus doesn't have to worry about directly competing in a shared visual space and wants to use a cool primary color, which should communicate some of their desired primary creative attributes. However, IBM owns blue and isn't giving it up any time soon. They decide to go with teal – still cool, but more contemporary than blue, and noticeably different from their non-IBM competitors. For a bit more differentiation, they bring in a golden yellow as a secondary color. This also serves to tie in some equity from the previous companies, whose logos included orange and yellow, respectively.

Plain & Simple knows that the top priority is standing out on a crowded shelf, and orange, green and blue are owned by primary competitors. However, the team doesn't want to stray too far from the field, given that they

need to establish and maintain credibility within the market. They land on a soft, warm purple as their primary color – not too vibrant, but different enough to be noticeable on shelf. For the secondary color palette, they settle on teal and a bright, yellowish green, which gives the packaging just the right amount of kick.

Swap recognizes that green is an obvious connection with the concept of money and, on top of that, the color is wide open within the competitive landscape. However, the team doesn't want to come across as part of the old-school establishment or get lost among a sea of apps, so they need to get a bit wild with it. They decide to go with a vibrant neon green for their logo and app icon, fleshed out with a secondary palette composed of black and a wider variety of neon colors.

The answers to these four questions will give you the tools you need to make a color palette decision that can jump-start your visual brand and give it the punch it needs when competing for the visual attention of your target audience. One additional piece of advice – don't forget the rest of your branding elements when making these decisions. Your color palette should flow seamlessly into your visual branding and name, becoming a piece of the larger brand puzzle. And just like with any other puzzle, it's a piece you don't want to forget.

it takes strategy
and creativity to
build a great brand.

**we
have
both.**

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