Logo design. If the Thin Man mysteries' author Dashiell Hammett had written the scenario, it might have gone something like this:

The new CEO called a meeting with the company's marketing director and the art director. A young secretary in a bottle-green shift led them into the boardroom, unceremoniously tossed a few million in contracts at the CEO, and left, pulling the carved-oak doors closed behind her. "This company needs to work on its image," the CEO announced, lighting a fresh Havana cigar and exhaling a thick cloud of blue smoke. Glancing at the marketing director, he said, "First, I want a capabilities brochure. You've got about three thousand words to sum up what the company is all about, where we come from, and where we're heading. Use words our clients'll understand. Make it speak to them. Make it current. Of course, I want it by yesterday. But don't worry, you can change it next quarter."

Then he turned to the art director, "From you we need a logo. Basically, I want you to do the same thing as the marketing director. Only you get to do it in one little symbol. A symbol that will be seen by a hundred times more people than will ever read the brochure. And by the way," he added while absently thumbing his white silk suspenders, "I want something that will last forever."

This story is more than a dramatization of what happens daily in offices around the world. It's how the logo-design process usually gets started. It seems that whenever a new company is developed or an established firm reinvents itself, a designer or a studio is commissioned to synthesize the entire firm into a compact, efficient visual representation.

When was the first logo designed? Condensing personal or business images is as ancient as the desire to brand possessions and personal achievements with icons that declare simple yet strong declarations such as "I own this" or "I made that." Nearly seven thousand years ago Transylvanian potters were inscribing their personal marks on the earthenware they created. If one made better pots than another it's a safe bet that his mark took on more intrinsic value than that of his competitors. Egyptian, Greek, and Roman craftsmen also carved or stamped their initials into their works. However, it was ancient religious sects that created some of the best-known logos: the Christian cross, the Judaic Star of David, and the Islamic crescent moon.
Medieval kings and nobles impressed their royal seals and coats of arms on everything from clothing, armor, flags, and shields to tableware, entryways, and manuscript bindings. Visually depicting a lord’s lineage, aspirations, or familial virtues, these symbols also served as eloquent reminders to cavalry, infantry, and mercenaries of who they were fighting for on the battlefields.

By the 1400s, the trademark had emerged as a symbol of an individual’s professional qualifications to perform a particular skill. The caduceus on a physician’s sign assured potential patients that the doctor was a well-trained practitioner of the medical arts. The angle and the compass symbolized the stoneworking craft—an honorable profession that built the huge cathedrals, universities, and castles of the period. These seemingly simple graphics carried so much socioeconomic and political weight that government offices were established throughout Europe during the 1500s and entrusted with the duty to register and protect the growing collection of trademarks used by the numerous craft guilds.

It didn’t take long for the concept of visually trademarking one’s business to spread when the Industrial Revolution shifted the political and economic balance of Europe and the Americas in favor of nonagricultural enterprise. By the late 1890s, business was booming worldwide, and so was corporate consciousness. The terms corporate image and brand identity didn’t enter the general business/design vocabulary until the late 1940s, but less than twenty years later, they were elemental keys to success according to the fresh breed of college-educated marketing executives.
Contemporary logo designs don't follow the same superficial common denominators applied by legendary image makers such as Paul Rand (creator of the IBM, UPS, ABC-TV, and Westinghouse logos) and the design team of Massimo and Lella Vignelli (creators of the Knoll Design, Bloomingdale's, and Lancia logos). During the 1960s and 1970s, monograms, geometric shapes, bold sans serif typefaces, and crayon colors were the only acceptable construction tools used to create these unique visual identities. The recent trend, however, seems to be leaning in the same direction as big business itself, taking a light, open, diversified, and sometimes whimsical approach. Logos are now designed to appeal on a more personal level to their intended audiences and to accommodate a wider variety of applications than they have in the past.

What does the new breed of logos share with its myriad predecessors? It delivers a clear, well-defined message of uniqueness and individuality. Many times, logos are the first and only impression consumers encounter when they are shopping for a particular product or service. A great logo must say something about the company it represents. Distilling a client's persona, mission, or market approach into a single gesture or emotion that can be conveyed by a strong stand-alone image is the heart and soul of the logo-design process. The finished design also must combine timeliness with timelessness and tradition with trend in a balance appropriate to the client's needs and consumers' desires. Successful logos, trademarks, and icons must be versatile, legible, and familiar. They must be equally legible on the corner of a business card or on the side of a delivery truck. They must be easy to reproduce on paper, plastic, fabrics, and metals or less tangible media such as television or Internet broadcasts. They must be easily interpreted at a glance by a broad audience of viewers, breeding a high level of familiarity between the intended message and its recipient.

Reviewing the client's needs, investigating the places where the design will be seen, and selecting the right visual cues are only a small portion of the job. The real answer can only be found once you've uncovered the logo's primary motive—what it's trying to tell its audience. You have to be a great "visual detective" to find the best logo design solution.