Signatures are personal representations. Some people sign their names with a breezy flourish, others with studied precision. However they write them, people's signatures become their legal marks on contracts, checks and the like.

Signatures are corporate representations, too, as much a statement of identity as a person's autograph. A corporate signature is a trademark, a brand name. It can lose its value if used improperly.

When AT&T introduced its new globe symbol and logotype at the time of divestiture, there were 24 versions and a complex set of rules to ensure correct usage. Despite the rules and intense monitoring of the system, confusion led to frequent and costly misuse of the corporate signature.

"At the time they were approved," says Renee Burton, manager of corporate identity and specialty advertising, "we didn't know how confusing they would be. Now we know."

So, to end the confusion and protect its good name and signature, the company launched an effort to simplify and unify its corporate identity program. Starting this month there will be only eight allowable versions of the AT&T signature. Changes like this should make it easier to use the signature properly and should cut the costs of improper usage. The ten-line globe symbol has been eliminated completely.

Does the change mean you should toss away anything that doesn't meet the new guidelines?

"Absolutely not," says Burton. "Current materials should be used up to avoid extra costs and waste. But new materials should be ordered using the new guidelines. We've already informed vendors about the appropriate designs, so most of the work is done for employees."

If using the corporate signature is part of your job, look for the new "Product Marking Guideline" and "Graphic Standards Guideline,” which will be distributed soon.

Wes Dvorak