

Brand expression matters

Packaging, design and brand 'voice' can mean as much as how a product performs

By JULIE CUCCHI and NIN GLAISTER

FORUM

REMARKING ON President Bush's new Department of Homeland Security, Paul Light, of the Brookings Institution, said: "They've got to design a flag, and stationery. You think that's

easy, or trivial, but it's critical to building an identity, a common culture."

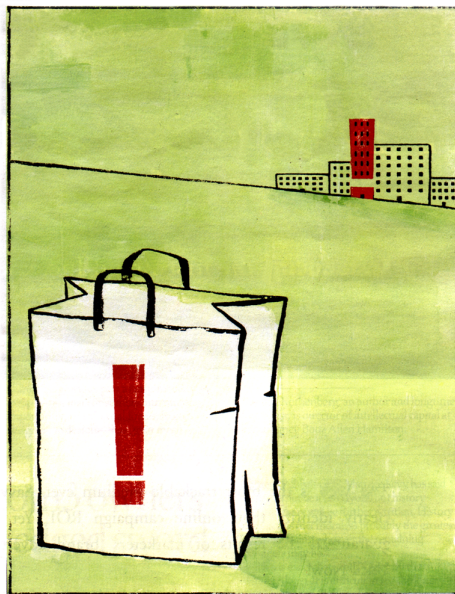
To any marketer that believes packaging and design are cosmetic, or that finding the brand "voice" is an indulgent exercise, this comment should serve as a wake up call. Mr. Light intuitively understands what many sophisticated marketers overlook: The way a brand expresses itself on the surface is as important to its survival as how it behaves over time. The two are, in fact, inextricably connected.

Brand expression—how your brand expresses itself from its name, logo, corporate ID, packaging design and copy, Web design and copy and all the annoying rules that fill its style guide—is the most tangible manifestation of its essence; it offers intimations before purchase of the brand's soul, validation and reminder of its promise after trial.

The energy and money spent on employee training, mission statements, high-priced consultants, customer service and R&D are wasted if your brand ends up behaving one way but looking, feeling and speaking another. But the resources deployed to define your brand can be strengthened and extended through brilliant brand design. Three ways come to mind:

- Brand as motivational tool. The dot com "revolution" left behind at least one important legacy. It changed forever the employer/employee dynamic. Maybe its not as easy as it was to quit on Friday and find a better job by Monday, but the revolving door of employee turnover hasn't slowed dramatically.

Employers have realized that employees need to be reminded daily why its worth getting up to go



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to work where they do. Mr. Light, quoted above, refers to "building a common culture." He alludes to an important function of brand design: to create external cues that inspire internal constituents. The employees of Nike tattoo the swish on their bodies because the logo says everything they feel about the brand and their employer.

Ad folk come into the Ogilvy & Mather building, never forgetting where they work or the personality of their agency's founder. The rugs and halls are painted red (the color of Ogilvy's suspenders) and David's signature adorns everything from the stationery to the lobby. This is more than corporate pride. It's brand design creating an "us" mentality and sense of family. O&M enjoys employee loyalty far greater than the industry average.

Want to enliven esprit de corps (literally, "spirit of the body")? Work on the spirit of your brand's body. Look at your own brand expression. Does it looks like something worth rallying around?

- Brand design extends your ad budget. Consumers are meeting your brand face-to-face on shelf or online. Are you making the most of these "free" opportunities? Does your brand express itself the way it should when a voice-over or billboard isn't actively selling its virtues?

We helped a client launch a line of fruit juices

with virtually no ad budget. The brand's essence was expressed by package design, slightly eccentric copy, flavor names and fruit-adorned delivery trucks (packaging on wheels). Soon consumers picked the shelves clean of the brand and storeowners called for more. A clear and well-conceived brand persona on the face of the brand was the only advertising it needed.

Even if you've got a healthy media budget make sure the physical expression of your brand is perfectly aligned with the ads and you'll be doubly blessed.

- Brand design protects turf. The current cycle of innovation is constant. Today's improvement is tomorrow's price of entry. No wonder companies are becoming addicted to the heroin of R&D, minute "product im-provements" and promotions. Again, brand design can help.

PERSONALITY VS. PARITY

Consumers' connection with your brand results from its behavior over time. But the connection is sustained at the level of look, feel and voice. If consumers know most of the brands in the category are alike, what criteria do they have left with which to make their choice?

We've all stayed with brands we suspect have lost their original claim to superiority because of an emotional connection. Their "voice" speaks to us. Or, they make up for their deficits (or parity) with a great personality. We like them more.

Brand design or voice can't cover up for product flaws. Bill Bernbach said, "Nothing is worse for a bad product than good advertising." But investment in brilliant brand design can provide as much insulation against encroaching competition as investment in product improvement R&D.

The search for brand identity is not an academic exercise. The answer won't survive in a bound document gathering dust on a shelf. A brand's essence is expressed through its look and voice—a daily opportunity to celebrate its true nature. Expression must be born from an intimate understanding of brand essence. If consciously conceived and brilliantly executed, it will be much more than skin deep. ■

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