Brand designers: a new breed

Packaging and design form a huge part of the FMCG market’s offering with products’ success hanging on being able to seduce the consumer with a thrumming whisper from the aisles amongst scores of boxes yelling their wares.

Think of packaging as the garments that tease and entice the taste buds. Whether your personal preference is ladies in Victorian garb, wanton low-cut lasses in designer minis or a Calvin Klein man, your food will speak to you just like any other brand and enforce a customer’s identity.

Why do you care? Hook into the right audience and your sales will skyrocket. Get it wrong and not only are you having to explain the expensive exercise to those on high who think in dollar symbols, you’ll also have to start all over again.

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

He’s cofinned Metallica’s latest album, so one can only imagine what he does for the FMCG sector. Bruce Duckworth, co-director of London-based Duckworth Turner is renowned for his expertise in packaging design.

He told FMCG: “We design for consumer goods. It’s where I think the role of packaging and design has changed. We’re brand designers – the difference that used to be called packaging design. The design is now used in so many areas, it becomes an identity.”

Duckworth has spent 25 years of his career focusing on the design of packaging. “When I started it was a very commercial application of graphic design and not particularly innovative,” he says. “I’ve noticed a huge change in the role of packaging; branding has become important, while advertising has lost its relevance for various reasons. Brands and packaging are the cornerstones of everything; they’re the closest you get to touching and consuming a product.”

According to Duckworth there are three distinct areas to focus on, presenting different opportunities for the designer and you, the client.

The first are global brands. These are brand leaders, the likes of Coca-Cola (Turner Duckworth has the account) and Kraft. Working with a global brand does limit a designer’s creative potential within specific boundaries, requiring “a special kind of strategic creativity”, however the motivation here is that great design will be seen by billions of people. A prime example – Coca-Cola’s 1.5 billion daily servings.

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The third area is own-label design, with a reputation for being the most creative form of packaging. Extremely mature in the UK market, Duckworth
LOCAL DESIGN CREATING DESIRE
There are many variations on the theme of "learn the rules so you know when to break them" and Annie Dow, founder and director of Auckland-based Dow Design, certainly did a lot of groundwork. Seven years in the UK working for Pentagon Design, followed by a small consultancy business back in New Zealand, led to desirable Dow Design – the emotionally connected design company that creates brands that people love - "if you truly love, read the high quality stock their branding is printed on.

Recognising packaging as an emerging niche that warranted specialisation, the Dow team has reaped the rewards of that intuition for 17 years, developing a reputation for award-winning design that breaks stale rules. That design truly is the result of teamwork, a bit dusty and tarnished. From a theme of "learn the rules so you know when to break them," read the high quality stock their branding is printed on.

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brands, defined as: “A brand that is very clear about what it’s here to do and relates to the consumer and can then dial up or down different aspects of its personality. The age of the corporate brand is dead and the age of the living brand is incredibly consistent, in its story rather than in its rigidity.”

Designworks itself is a good example. The company is pushing on 30 years and has changed from being a corporate identity and corporate communications business to a strategic design practice using “logic and magic”, which Crampin explains as a combination of left and right brain thinking, technology and art.

“There are no real distinctions between packaging and identity design,” he says, “They’re just components of a jigsaw in understanding the story that’s told. With Monteith’s we created a series of scenes to give you a sense of place and taste.

“There is a notion of Radler, as a gate which you walk through into an orchard. With Summer Ale the type is etched out of sand, Black Beer is in black sand. There is a visceral aspect to it, a sensorial feel that breaks the codes. What we’re seeing is brands stretching outside the traditional codes and starting to be very creative in terms of telling the story and engaging the consumer in a different way, dalling in provenance and delivering it with an attitude in tune with the notion of what a brand stands for.

“Ultimately it’s understanding the wider perspective and having an innate understanding of the battleground in which the brand appears. For us we’ve moved from being focused purely on one-dimensional design, we’re going into industrial design and deeper wider expressions of it. We have a spatial designer and product designer on board now so we’re involved in the physical product: design, shape and form. Design is a bigger way to think about something rather than a 2D graphic concept.”

YOU, THE CLIENT
For a creative, even those schooled in the steely disciplines of the business world, there is nothing worse than an overly prescriptive client. “The best types of clients love design and appreciate the value that it gives. Look at Apple, look at Coca-Cola, they all have people who understand design in very senior management roles,” says Duckworth from his London office.

“It’s about having the freedom to give them the right answer rather than the client being prescriptive about the answer they want. Our design is a visual expression of the personality of the company we work for. Prescriptive clients don’t get great value out of us, they could go somewhere much cheaper and much less creative and get the same result,” he says.

Other complaints echoed by fellow designers are when good design is “fiddled around with” in-house and when poor creative briefs are given.

As Dow Design’s Andy Jaquet reminds us; “The cost of getting it wrong is far more expensive than paying the right price for a good brand. That’s the reason it’s an expensive game. It’s a serious investment and you want to get it right first time.”

“Keep the message simple” is the mantra for designers, but the challenges in doing so are anything but simple. These specialists have to communicate what the product is and what its benefits are despite a raft of restrictions: the size and shape of the pack, sustainability and legal requirements (make sure to read the legal column on page 45 if you have concerns).

Vitaco’s Waddle says: “It’s always a compromise between complying legally and your ideal packaging design. In our supplements range there are a number of additional labelling requirements to comply with and a number of our products have quite a small format. You have scope on a cereal box, but on a supplements bottle you only have a small area to convey what the consumer needs to navigate the category.”

It can also be hard to get noticed and once you are, to get customers to actually care about what you are trying to communicate. Kate Smith at Shine says: “Brand owners can get very obsessed with the idea that people might reject them. That’s not the problem, indifference is the problem.”

The best way to combat this according to Smith is: “Try not to be all things to all people. By definition you will be bland so won’t really stand for anything. You have to have a point of view, you have to be prepared for the fact that not everybody will agree with you. Ask yourself: ‘How can I find a group of people who I can get to strongly engage with my brand. Nike for example would rather have a smaller group of people who love them than a larger group of people who think they are okay.”

Increasingly designers have less of a canvas to work with. Sustainability is an important component of packaging design, so much so that it warrants its own story. Turner Duckworth often conducts entire audits on packaging, stressing which types of material to use based on recyclability. Less packaging is used than in previous years but even so, more needs to be done. After all, as Duckworth puts it: “Over a billion serves a day has a huge impact on global resources.”

If you’ve done the groundwork, you should be consulting experts in the field of design, particularly if you are working with a design company that has specialist knowledge and experience in the FMCG industry. Make use of that expertise. You may know everything about your product but it’s highly unlikely you’ll be a design guru and trend spotter as well. You’re paying good money for it so once you’ve established the parameters, stop back, open your mind and prepare to be amazed, or at least to reap the benefits of other people’s amazement when the product walks off the shelf.

Designers and clients alike agree: a good brand opens doors in terms of supermarkets and retail as people have an emotional response to packaging. According to those in the know, the global brand is the future, not a “rubber stamping of the same design around the world”, as Duckworth describes it, but as a flexible, identity driven brand with personality.

Great design sells more products, just look at Coca-Cola and Apple. That’s a commercial imperative for looking good that will satisfy the most staid beancounter.