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CASE STUDY: SMALL INVESTMENT BIG RESULTS - PACKAGING DESIGN AS BRAND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCALLY-OWNED BUSINESS IN TEXAS

ESTUDO DE CASO: PEQUENO INVESTIMENTO E GRANDES RESULTADOS – DESIGN DE EMBALAGEM COMO DESENVOLVIMENTO DE MARCA PARA NEGÓCIO LOCAL NO TEXAS

RESUMO

Este artigo traça um estudo de caso no desenvolvimento de marcas para uma pequena empresa no Texas . O estudo foi feito por um grupo de

estudantes que frequentam uma classe de design de embalagens no outono de 2012. Seu ponto de partida é baseado no mito de que as empresas de propriedade local são sinônimos, sem necessidade de brand equity ou de investimento no desenvolvimento de marca devido ao nicho de mercado isolado. O estudo investiga uma abordagem de design, onde marca e embalagem estão intrinsecamente ligada se deslocam lugares. Marca como um produto, a embalagem como a marca, e assim por diante.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Design de embalagem. Identidade de Marca.

ABSTRACT

This article maps out a case study in brand development for a small business in Texas done by a group of students attending a packaging design class in the fall of 2012. Its starting point is based on the myth that locally-owned businesses are synonymous with no need for brand equity or investment in brand development due to isolated niche market. The study investigates a design approach where brand and packaging are intrinsically connected and shifting places. Brand as a product, packaging as brand, and so on.

KEYWORDS

Packaging design. Brand identity.

1. THE CHALLENGE

Brands and packaged products permeate every single aspect of our everyday life. They are indispensable guides for consumers and unquestionably ways for companies to build equity, reputation, and an image in the marketplace. A product's brand appeal can be as important for determining competitive success as its quality or even price tag. In short, a recognized brand is among the most valuable intangible assets a company can own—regardless its size and market.

The challenging points for this article are, firstly, the widespread myth that due to shoestring budgets and low profile, small or locally owned businesses do not need a cohesive brand design system. Here, I use the term locally owned loosely and synonymous to family-owned. Secondly, applying systematic design approach to brand and packaging development does not necessarily mean abandonment of loyal customers; neither reflects a company's approach to reposition itself in a completely new market. Lastly and equally important, the question which still seems unanswerable to some people, if it is conceivable to stay small and invest little while thinking big.

2. METHODOLOGY

Throughout a case study of a project done by students in a packaging design class for local business in Abilene, Texas – USA, this descriptive and analytical essay will demonstrate that it is possible to consider brand development through packaging design as a bold form of growth while yet retaining a 'family-owned and operated' business quality, regardless, particularly in this case, if the project is done with minimal investment supported by collaborations with educational institutions or not.

3. THE BRAND AND PACKAGE AS PRODUCT

In an era with widely branded goods the practice of packaging design moved from a technological or structural one to the amalgamation of aesthetics, design thinking and visual strategy. And just like any organic evolutionary system, packaging and brand are directly influenced by the prevalent styles and attitudes of popular cultures. Instead of the individual subjective interpretation of the message that was propagated across various cultures, business strategists launched the idea of a more cohesive, aggressive and holistic brand systems. So designers, marketers and entrepreneurs started paying more attention to the brand as bidding force between the product and the consumer. In her popular book Alina Wheeler eloquently offered a comment that "brand is the promise, the big idea, and the expectations that reside in each customer's mind about a product" (Wheeler, 2003). As I fully

subscribe to her statement, however, I would like to go further and suggest the brand is the product.

To say that brand and packaging design need a sound sense of history is to state the obvious. But all of a sudden there was rush, certainly when design, brand systems and mass communications, under the influence of the new brand thinking had to become not only successful but equally attractive as well. And the communication branch threw itself into the new phenomenon wholesale. Still, the crisis came about because the short-term thinking put pressure on consideration of the essentials, on the fundamental communications question. An article published in the book *Total Identity* by Hans Brandt and Jurjen Bügel suggests that fundamental shifts in our culture, social economics and the patterns of communication associated with them have profoundly altered the conditions for communications and design due to: [1]

the dissolving of differences between branches and product characteristics

the synthesis of goods and services

the increasingly intermediary nature of distribution

the forming of communities

the increasing regionalization of consumption patterns

As we continued the study of these origins, throughout a comprehensive design methodology packaging designers use many tools available combined with creativity to solve complex marketing problems. Ideation techniques such as brainstorming, exploration, experimentation, rapid prototyping and strategic thinking followed by implementation are some of the fundamental ways that visual and verbal information is shaped into a concept, idea, or design strategy. To put it coldly and categorically, packaging design must function as the aesthetics means of communicating a narrative, a story to people from a diversity of backgrounds, interests, and experiences; therefore, an awareness of multidisciplinary approach can benefit the design process and the appropriate design choices. In particular a broad understanding of social, contextual variations, human behaviors, and cultural representations can contribute to a more fully comprehension of how visual elements communicate.

Insofar as stated above, packaging can often be considered the first *touchpoint* of a brand, so not only it is very important that packages initially pull their attention but also quickly convey the messages that both present and support the brand. This holds for Gavin Ambrose in the same sense it holds for Marianne Klimchuck. “Communicating a brand message extends beyond the information and visual content of packaging. The physical materials used for packaging products also importantly contribute to the overall brand statements projected.” (Ambrose, Harris, 2011) As they would both agree, a brand cannot be positioned as a high quality of luxury product if its packaging is fragile and low quality. There has to be a direct correlation between the packaging’s physical attributes and the messages that the brand seeks to project. For Ambrose, there is no doubt that “package and brand are essentially inseparable.” But how exactly could they function in particular as it related to Monks in Abilene, TX?

4. CASE STUDY: MONKS COFFEE SHOP

In the fall of 2012 I challenged my packaging design students to design a couple of packages for a local coffee shop and its products. The brief also requested they should approach the packaging project as brand identity development, so they also needed to redesign its current mark.

PROJECT BACKGROUND (as it was presented to the students)

Brief

Redesign two existing coffee packages and one new product of choice for MONKS Coffee Co. This project will challenge you not only to continue to improve your creative skills while designing packages, but also to understand packaging design as it directly relates to brand development. Research existing products, competitors, local markets, cultural context, and propose one new product. The new product can be (but not limited to) cake mix, brownies, chocolate-covered coffee beans, mints, etc. Once determined what products to be developed, define their characteristics, name, and design, bearing in mind MONKS brand equity and core values: community support, locally owned business.

Objectives

- Breathe a new life into a stale and inconsistent brand, by creating clear and concise packages.
- Break through a crowded market dominated by mainstream companies/brands.
- Introduce new product, and redesigned mark as catalyst for rebuilding the Monks brand.
- Design a packaging architecture for greater brand visibility.
- All the above done at minimum cost.

Monks Coffee is located in downtown Abilene, TX—USA. After visiting the store for field examinations and sampling a few of their products, each student collected information that was considered important as they started the design process. The coffee shop is known for its support of local community throughout events such as open microphone night, art exhibition space, as well as a space for conversations; hang out, amongst other kinds of gatherings and meetings. In his own words, Jerry Hendrix (founder/owner) describes the store as: “when you enter our store you will first notice the art adorning our mocha colors walls and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. When you sit on one of our comfortable sofas to have a conversation with a friend you will realize you are a part of the Monks community. Whether you sit and talk for a while or stop in on your way to work we want to you experience a simple part of life.” Indeed, Monks has stayed atop despite the fact it has remained small, offering cozy study and conversational areas to its customers. In other words, the decision to remain small is not just based on financial restraints, Monks does not pretend to be Starbucks neither another big name coffee brand. It is simply a matter of their business plan.

DESIGN CHALLENGE

Deep in the first act, the challenge of course was how to retain the company’s core values—the sense of being locally owned, distributing carefully handcrafted products, and community support—and deliver a cohesive narrative in a unified way. For a fact, students were asked to deeply research the family-business topic and look at some positive aspects of staying small. A clear picture was depicted as in the United States alone,

family-owned businesses are as distinctive and idiosyncratic as those who own and run their companies. And according to the *Harvard Business Review*, their ownership structure when family members are actively engaged “gives them a long-term orientation that traditional public firms often lack” [2]. Moreover, 5.5 million family-owned businesses make up 57% of the country’s GDP, as they employ 63% of America’s workforce and responsible for nearly 80% of all new jobs creation [3].

So students quickly realized that redesigning packages while simultaneously developing a brand required a clear implementation, and representation of Monks’ ownable equities, that could remain consistent at the core. Students also needed to explain to the client that packaging system and graphics functioning hand in hand, could offer potential points of differentiation for a business. In this particular case, Monks Coffee presented inconsistent and disconnected visual cues such as unbranded coffee bags (Fig. 1), lack of cohesive brand mark (Fig. 2), making it almost impossible for customers to develop brand equity.



Figure 1. Unbranded coffee bags. Monks Coffee.



Figure 2. Inconsistent brand mark. © Monks Coffee.

THE SOLUTIONS: Monks Brand Mark

The approach was to first design and unify the brand with stronger visual elements (primarily type-based with an allusion to Western heritage without being cliché), presenting uniqueness, clarity, identification and easy readability (Fig. 3-A). The brand name remained as the main element while other descriptors were added: the kind of business and location. By keeping it monochromatic, the printing process was greatly reduced (considering the fact a simple rubber-stamp could suffice for branding the coffee packages).



Figure 3. Previous logo. ©Monks Coffee.



Figure 3-A. Redesigned logo. ©Nil Santana/packaging design class, 2012.

THE SOLUTIONS: Beyond the Box, Design and Narrative

As I asked students to resist preconceptions from the start, it also made sense to understand the history of packaging design being without a doubt intrinsically connected to many aspects of the emerging cultures and technological developments. Undoubtedly the improvements of

production processes, materials and the conditions of evolving consumer societies demanded the need for packaging to protect, store, transport, inform, and when needed, to sell. Consequently, packaging design quickly became the means to visually communicate the products and their contents. But since Monks only sells coffee bags in-store, the need to clearly show the content inside the bags, or graphics referring to coffee beans was not an issue. Rather, they should focus on other core elements that were related to the experience, and local community.

Next, they were asked to think packaging and storytelling together. So much like a plot in film or story, every packaging has a narrative to be told, and each story moves along at its natural, determined rhythm. For Monks Coffee that would not be different. As designers, it is imperative we must have a good grasp of such rhythm—the setting which the product will be displayed, the manner which the audience will hold the package, look at it, analyze it, experience its features, and interpret the information sensibly. Packaging beyond the box is emotion. Packaging design and brand development are ultimately directly responsible for resolving the marketing objectives of the product by distinctively communicating a consumer product's personality and function.

It is very important that being one the first *touchpoints*, packaging plays a key role in defining a brand and driving relevance in this fast-paced market regardless the size of the company and its market. When developing brand and packaging, such activity presents opportunities for new or already established brands to break out of the clutter and let their identity naturally excel. Many companies will give value to packaging only when their brands are deteriorating or when a new competitor's product is about to launch. Here, before continuing, it is necessary to introduce the notion that refreshing a product's packaging as a project within a fixed end rather than considering the "evolution of packaging should be a regular conversation and strategic choice as the brand strategy evolves." (Doyle, Hall, 2012) Packaging design as brand development is an organic system evolving in a continuous change. So the design solutions for Monks needed to be open and allow for continual additions or changes.

By utilizing illustrations of local buildings and monuments, one of the simplest solutions by student Mandy Lambright incorporated visual elements of the community, and local culture that was broad enough to

suggest the emphasis in art, music, and entertainment (Fig. 3).

One of the illustrations depicts The Grace Museum—an important museum for West Texas containing an eclectic art collection. The Grace Museum builds connections through new experiences in art, science and history within the evolving Texas story through exhibitions, programs and collections. The Museum maintains a unique position among West Texas attractions. Housed in a historically significant 105 year-old building, The Grace Museum is recognized as an asset for its cultural heritage as well as its educational opportunities. And the other illustrates The Paramount Theater. Built in 1930 by H. O. Wooten, the Paramount is the only structure of its grandeur between El Paso and Fort Worth, Texas. The theater was fully restored and renovated in 1986 and now stand as an icon for the revitalization of the city's downtown district as well as a nostalgic glimpse into American cinematic and theatrical past. Since its creation, the theater has been the home to a myriad of events including films, concerts, musical productions, operas, dance, and an annual international short-film festival.

Additionally, color-stapled tags indicate the content (type of roast, blend or flavor) that were not necessarily 'tied' to the illustration. The add-on labels also suggested a special attention to detail, freshly roasted beans, as well as a sense of handcrafted products.



Figure 3. Mandy Lambright. 2012



Figure 4. Kayla Calvert. 2012

The gestural line quality rendered in the illustrations (hand-drawn as opposed to vectorized imagery) contributed to retain a personal touch throughout the illustrations, avoiding copycats, even when they represented other iconic elements such as coffee mugs, cups, etc. printed on the paper wrap for biscotti, by Kayla Calvert (Fig. 4). A monochromatic stamp was sufficient to brand plain coffee paper cups that could be easily done by the shop staff during low-foot-traffic.

5. CONCLUSION

Before starting the project, students realized that coffee bags were traditionally illustrated with elements that resemble the coffee's origin (beautiful hills, coffee plants, farmers, etc). For Monks Coffee Shop that would not work because of its diverse source of whole coffee beans, as they continually sell different blends, according to market availability. The newly designed brand and packages brought insightful results taking advantage of the local and rich heritage, delivering a cohesive system that worked efficiently and increased Monks Coffee Shop brand equity in many ways.

A post-project research is in its way where measurable results are being collected. Thus far, both client and customers seem to respond positively. The final development cost, plus initial implementation—stamps, t-shirts, window display vinyl—was under US\$1000. This investment is quite small even if compared to other locally-owned businesses incomes in the area. Because of the low cost, a ROI (return on investment) study was not

necessary as the client simply considered not impactful in the budget. Again, nonetheless the collaborative nature, partnering with a class in this case study has greatly contributed to the upfront low investment. It certainly can be an effective model for companies running on small budgets, but the main challenge was indeed how to convince the owner that a consistent design system between brand and packages would reflect on customer experience, and most importantly, students were able to create a differentiated system away from major look-alikes. After the rebrand Monks Coffee Shop continued to resemble what was before, and not pretending to be other mainstream coffee shops. It remained small and community-oriented.

At any moment the quality of the products were in question. That was not the scope of the project. So by simply changing the appearance of what was already in place, the project worked as a catalyst for bringing product quality, service, and experience together.

NOTES

[1] Hans Brandt, JujenBügel. From Brand Proposition to Involvement and Dialogue. In: Total Identity (Firm). Total Identity. Amsterdam: BIS, 2003. Print.

[2] Available from: <http://hbr.org/2012/11/what-you-can-learn-from-family-business>.

[3] According to the University of Vermont's School of Business Administration. [Accessed in January 2, 2014] Available from: <http://www.uvm.edu/business/vfbi/?Page=facts.html>.

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