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Sustainable design for
conscientious living.

Nine Design Strategies

To Ensure Your Sustainable Brand and Packaging
Inspires Sustainable Profits.





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As our economy gradually rebounds from its recent tailspin, executives and entrepreneurs everywhere are awakening to the need for new, more enduring business models that successfully promote a “triple bottom line”, balancing traditional corporate reporting that takes into account ecological and social performance in addition to financial performance. But with new dedication to change, these concerns have truly become urgent, top-of-mind priorities for professionals from every sector, at every level of the corporate hierarchy. Nowhere is this urgency being more deeply felt than across the struggling retail and consumer goods industries.

The terms “complete life-cycle analysis” and “cradle-to-cradle” design— once relatively esoteric concepts for a passionate cadre of environmental innovators— have now captured the imagination of product development and packaging design mainstream. As a team of designers and marketing strategists who have long embraced these principles, we at EDG couldn’t be more thrilled. Yet we are also a bit concerned. Do these terms represent a true shift in thinking among the corporate mainstream? More importantly, in this topsy-turvy economy, will companies that authentically seek to employ these strategies be able to generate profitable business results? Will they have the business acumen, courage, and marketing savvy needed to translate these idyllic principles into sustainable real-world results?

As we survey the current corporate landscape, we are guardedly optimistic. We see scarcity-minded executives focusing on sustainability almost exclusively through the lens of material cost/waste-reduction, overlooking fabulous new opportunities for innovation. We see marketing budgets being impulsively slashed, with existing monies allocated in ways that unwittingly minimize the ROI potential for precious advertising dollars. More than we’d like to admit, we see the distribution of promising, environmentally oriented products packaged in ways that demonstrate little insight into the psychology of the targeted consumer groups, as short-cutting the immense potential to attract new customers into the environmental consciousness fold. However, we also see an unprecedented collective opportunity to transform the consumer goods markets through innovative design strategies and psychologically sophisticated communications.

We feel that the time has come to change the conversation from one of scarcity, to one of inspiration and insight. As one modest branding and design firm in a sea of companies seeking to sustain— and even prosper— in a struggling global economy, we are indeed bold enough to believe that we truly can make a difference. The present may be uncertain, but wisdom shows that the future is for those with the courage to innovate during times of uncertainty, and the generosity to freely share their insights with those who can benefit from them most. It is in this spirit that this paper was written. After more than three decades of designing brands that last, we have discovered a variety of innovative design strategies that are remarkably effective for converting strangers into happy, loyal customers through inspired product and packaging design.



#1 FEELINGS = PROFITS (ALWAYS BRAND FOR EMOTIONAL IMPACT!)

Logic is great for mathematicians, but emotion is what sells. Because of the pressing need to inform consumers about the sustainable aspects of packaging, many sustainable packaging designs overemphasize information at the expense of compelling, emotionally engaging aesthetics. Studies in the psychology of consumer purchasing behaviors have consistently shown that the vast majority— up to 85% of consumer goods sales occur on impulse alone, with nearly two thirds of all purchasing decisions being made right at the point of sale! ⁱ Consumers are highly sensitive, emotionally driven beings with an unending desire to experience joy, warmth, and excitement. Smart product marketers embrace this fact and invest in their product and packaging design to tap into these consumer attributes.

So how, exactly, does one design emotionality into their packaging? This is where truly talented branding and design professionals earn their keep. Emotional branding thrives on simplicity, authenticity and a passion for evocative details. The human brain is an incredibly sophisticated and sensitive organ, capable of decoding the most subtle visual cues for emotional tone and resonance. Great designers are able to distill the soul essence of your brand and authentically express it through designs that resonate powerfully and immediately with the emotional core of your target customers. The mind-arresting gestalt of such creative visual designs may seem mysterious and magical, but the financial payoff for those who employ them is tangible and immediate.

For evidence, look no further than Apple. Due largely to a simple, superb visual design strategy, Apple has created a brand that has become synonymous with the feelings of inspiration, innovation and creativity in millions. Online brand zealots build virtual shrines to Apple products past and present, and devoted customers do not hesitate to stand in line for hours to pay a premium for newly released apple products! Only emotional branding (combined with quality product design) could accomplish such irrationally positive business results.

But Apple is just one example of many. From the “Think Small” VW Beetle of the 60’s to a new generation of brands, including Amazon.com, eBay, and Starbucks, emotionally evocative branding has transformed the commercial landscape of our country over the past five decades. The big question for us today is this: Are we— the aspiring leaders of a new sustainable economy— ready to apply this same wisdom to branding environmentally sound products that sell to the mainstream? Environmental consciousness will gain mainstream traction only when a critical number of consumers start feeling emotionally compelled towards environmentally friendly products and services, and not a minute sooner. Make emotionally evocative and appealing aesthetic choices your primary design goal, and watch your odds of becoming your customer’s next impulse buy improve exponentially over the competition. ⁱⁱ



#2 MAXIMIZE MARKETING ROI THROUGH BRANDED, STRATEGIC PACKAGING

Although some marketing executives treat package design as an afterthought, allocating the lion's share of their budgets to traditional advertising media outlets, most marketing executives recognize that package design is an integral part of their branding strategy. They understand that while large budget media production and buys elicit excellent return on investment, so does a top-notch package brand identity system. Common sense presents an excellent comparison of the brand building capabilities of a 60-second television commercial versus an eye-catching packaging system which generates "views" each and every time a customer visits a store. The predominant thinking of the world's most successful brand builders these days is not so much *reach* (how many consumers see my ad) and *frequency* (how often do they see it), but rather finding ways to get consumers to invite brands into their lives. The mass media won't disappear as a tool. But smart companies see the game today as making bold statements in design and wooing consumers by integrating messages so closely into entertainment that the two are all but indistinguishable. You as a marketer are already aware of CPM on electronic media vs. retail package impressions. Investing in superior package design and shelf presence is equally as important as more traditional media, and its ROI pays off not only in CPM, but in brand visibility at point of purchase.

Furthermore, consider that the same branded packaging system continues to live on well after your product is purchased. From this perspective, it becomes clear that great packaging does a lot more than help display your products— it helps you communicate your brand's core identity and is arguably your most efficient, long-lasting, cost-effective marketing tool. iii

The shift toward sustainable packaging means more than simply using less packaging materials from more renewable and environmentally friendly sources. Why not expand your product's complete life-cycle assessments (CLA) with a *branding* life-cycle assessment to make sure you are maximizing the marketing value of your packaging at every stage of the sales process? Thinking along these lines, several innovative package designers have already discovered clever ways to encourage customers to re-use their leftover packaging materials. For example, Pangea Organics, an ecocentric skincare company, designed their gift boxes to be bright yet simple, as well as 100% compostable, biodegradable and plantable. Imagine foregoing your holiday wrapping paper in lieu of saving trees, and giving the gift of less waste. Yep...that's right... the label instructs customers to re-purpose the container by removing the label and flattening the box before planting. Soak in water for 24 hours. Plant in 1/8" deep soil, keep warm, and expect a beautiful spruce tree to germinate in a couple of weeks. Beyond Panega's own skin care products biodegrading in 48 hours, all of their packaging actually breaks down making the earth a big winner as well. This is far more inventive than just reusing a Smuckers jelly jar for a regular drinking glass. But instead of throwing away or recycling it, imagine the brand equity you've got when you've developed a package that helps eliminate CO₂ from our atmosphere. We believe that smart ideas like this are the wave of the sustainable packaging revolution still to come.

#3 ATTRACT NEW MARKET SHARE WITH INNOVATIVE COLORS AND SHAPES

Stop. Close your eyes. Imagine, for a moment, standing in your customer's shoes. You are staring at shelf-upon-shelf of similar or competing products, just pleading to be purchased. Which product will your eyes be automatically drawn to? What aspects of the packaging will you notice first... second... third... fourth?



Which one will you eventually pick up? Which ones will you ignore? How will you ultimately decide? After performing a thorough analysis of hundreds of brand equity studies, chairman of Perception Research Services, Elliot Young, determined that consumers' eyes are universally drawn to first notice three primary dimensions of a given product package: color, shape, and company logo. Further, Young determined that most people process product packaging in exactly that sequence— color first, shape second (if distinctive), and logo last. ^{iv} Knowing this information, wouldn't it be smart to design your packaging accordingly?

Although this may sound like common sense, it isn't. Many manufacturers create brands and packages that— through color, shape, and logotype— do very little to grab attention and stand out from the competition. Avoid the mistakes of most companies! Be bold and innovative with your design choices. Shake things up. Find a way to grab your audience's attention through strong, tasteful package designs that command your audience's attention so that your unique offering will truly stand out. Some recent success stories provide ample evidence of this design strategy's effectiveness.

For example, Method cleaning products has cornered the sustainable cleaning products market with one of the most simple provocative packaging design motifs ever conceived. As one walks down the aisle, Method's colorful, shapely bottles call out to one's senses with color, clarity, and confidence. Is it any wonder that Method has quickly become one of the most widely respected sustainable product offerings? Their brand is inextricably linked to their innovative packaging, building a viral word of mouth buzz that continues to push up product sales without the need for a huge investment in traditional marketing outlets. Imagine accomplishing all of this without ever even openly trumpeting one's own environmental agenda. How's that for branding elegance?

In a concerted effort to shifting it's entire company towards sustainability and an authentic commitment to environmental stewardship, the Clorox Corporation has recently thrown its hat into the green cleaning ring with the launch of Green Works, a line of "natural" green cleaners designed to compete with Method and Seventh Generation. After only one year in the marketplace, thanks to their eye-catching bold and colorful branding, Green Works has already garnered 42% market share, and is a stand out line among the emerging organic cleaning products available.

But please know that not all attention-grabbing sustainable packaging need be designed for explicitly sustainable products. These simple principles of color and shape can be used to create packages that bolster sales of products from every sector while considering the raw materials being used and reducing the amount of packaging materials required. For example, we were recently hired by hip California toy manufacturer Razor to redesign a series of display boxes for their award-winning "Ripstick" Caster Board. Balancing their needs for brand visibility and cost-control, we designed for them a colorful, shapely, eye-catching-yet-sturdy box that uses 40% less material and takes up 50% less space than their traditional box (increasing shipping capacity by nearly 200%!). Although our primary goal was to create a branded package design that would drive up sales, through innovative design we were able to do this while also creating the potential for dramatic savings on both materials and shipping costs. Greater shelf impact, improved sales, decreased costs, less material waste— who says you can't have it all?



#4 DISTILL AND EXPRESS UNDERLYING BRAND ARCHETYPES

Scientists estimate that the average person has up to 70,000 thoughts each day, in response to at least as many environmental stimuli. Clear your mind. Think of yesterday... Now, what percentage of your 70,000 thoughts can you now easily recall? How many from the day before? And the day before that? You get the picture: not that many! As humans, we are each endlessly drifting in a sea thoughts and sensory data, some of it chaotic, most of it quickly forgotten. Given all this complexity, it's amazing that anyone can ever remember anything at all. But we do. Each of us carries a treasure trove of sacred memories and images within our brains, potent visual and emotional cues that stick with us and unconsciously work to fashion our very sense of self. The take-home question is "Why?" Why do some thoughts and images stick with us and become sacred, while others just waft through our mind like so many wind-blown grains of sand?

The answer lies in the hidden power of archetypes. Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung made his name outlining the core mental structures that animate the human psyche, which he affectionately termed "archetypes." Jung conceived of archetypes as a core set of universal images and ideas that have shaped mankind's psychology from the very origins of the human experience. We will not attempt to cover all of these primal images here, but rather will offer one bit of powerful marketing advice: distill the core archetypes that underlie your brand and design them into all of your marketing/packaging materials. By doing so you will energize your brand to leave indelible imprints on the minds of those who encounter your products, and successfully engage them to remember your brand from among the 70,000 other factors competing for their attention on any given day. This claim may seem outrageous, but the evidence is all around us.

Want to know why children love Mickey Mouse around the world so much? Look to the archetypes. Want to understand why the movie "The Titanic" was so popular? Look to the archetypes. Want to understand why Abraham Lincoln is still considered by many to be the best president in U.S. history? Look to archetypes... Get the picture? Nearly every personal and public event or icon that has resonated in your mind in the course of your life has been so moving and resonant precisely because it has hit upon an archetype within your unconscious that you instinctively hold dear. Why not consciously use this same archetypal power to brand your sustainable products and packaging?

This isn't just academic theory. We speak from experience. At EDG we have been using this subtle skill for years to create brands that have won us awards far too numerous to mention. Suffice it to say that we've gotten pretty good at it. From the archetypal New England Patriots logo and uniforms to an Idyllwild Jazz in the Pines festival poster which resides in the permanent collection of the Library of Congress, we have more than thirty years of proven experience distilling and expressing brand archetypes for our clients. What truly excites us is that we have positioned ourselves to do this for every company we work with. The idea that keeps us feeling inspired each day at work is that something as traditional as consumer product packaging could truly become the vehicle for transformational images that move customers to feel, think and experience life more fully.



#5 LISTEN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS' SUBCONSCIOUS NEEDS

Marketing researchers are continually frustrated at the huge gap between what their customers say they want from a product and what they will actually purchase. For example, the vast majority of Americans now claim to be very concerned about global warming and the environment, yet only a small minority of these individuals will go out their way to find and purchase a majority of products that truly conform to high environmental standards. Why is this?

The truth is that—like it or not—people's actions are usually driven more by raw impulse and emotion than by conscious reason, or explicitly stated ideals. We find that the trick for designing sustainable products and packages that sell is better listening. Listening for what? Listening for the subconscious needs that your customer feels beneath the more rational rhetoric he or she so quickly espouses. In other words, pay less attention to just what your customers say, and more attention to what they truly mean. This simple distinction can make the difference between utter financial failure and outlandish business success.

For example, when Chrysler launched the PT Cruiser in 2000, they created a huge splash in the car industry and ended up with an order waiting list over a mile long. However the prevailing industry wisdom of the time (based upon “in-depth” market research) was that consumers had grown tired of sedans, and were primarily interested in cars with such practical attributes as gas efficiency, safety, and mechanical reliability. Most manufacturers were designing and marketing cars based upon those sensible features. The reason Chrysler was able to generate such extraordinary success was that they out-listened the competition. Through innovative research they discovered that customers subconsciously craved something much different than conventional wisdom suggested. Beyond safety and efficiency, customers truly longed for a car that could stoke a sense of freedom, sensuality and excitement. Chrysler took this to heart and designed the PT Cruiser to specifically embody these traits. ^{vi} The rest— as they say— is history.

These same principles that Chrysler used to design and promote their breakthrough sedan can also be applied to help you design and market sustainable products that sell. Get to know your customers. Run a focus group. Perform a social media analysis. Dig beneath the surface and listen between the words. Find out what their souls long for and design this into evocative brands and marketing collateral that enchants them in surprising (and unprecedented) ways. Consciously or not, this is what pioneering companies such as Method, Zhená's Gypsy Tea, New Belgium Brewery, and Pangea Organics have already been doing to create breakthrough business results. The time has come for more of us to become better listeners so that we can do the same.

#6 AVOID THE 'GRANOLA BRANDING' TRAP

After Al Gore's movie “An Inconvenient Truth” hit the mainstream, being “green” became the coolest thing since sliced (whole-grain) bread. Soon magazines everywhere began playing up the importance of greening everything from toothbrushes to toasters, with the most shameless profusion of green puns ever observed. Meanwhile, on the design front, being truly eco-chic seemed to require product developers to strip down all color from their packaging, displaying only colorless hemp-like papers and fabrics, invariably accented by at least one good splash of vibrant green (usually in the shape of an abstracted plant, tree, or leaf).



At EDG we don't have a particular problem with this earthy design style. In fact, we'll openly confess to having a bit of that design streak buried deep down in our company's collective unconscious. But, having had the opportunity to help brand more than a few sustainable products and services over the years, we feel it important to announce that the days of mainstream granola branding are now officially over. This isn't to say that certain naturally branded products will not still do well with the LOHAS crowd (such as, for example, the excellent packaging by Pangea Organics), but rather to urge you to consider taking a different approach, especially if your products are targeted towards the mainstream.

The problem with granola branding is that for every customer who loves this particular look and feel, there are probably several who dislike it. Environmental mindedness—once the province of a hearty, passionate group of activists—has now become a national, even global imperative. The good news here is that a new generation of eco-friendly customers is just waiting for the right products or services to call them into a more sustainable product-purchasing repertoire. Perhaps then, design brands of today will enroll everyone into a non-partisan, eco-friendly future.

#7 FRAME MESSAGING AND BRANDING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE'S VALUES

Traditional brand and marketing strategies have tended over the years to view customers through the lens of traditional demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and income. Unfortunately, traditional branding and marketing strategies do not consistently work. Why not? Because demographic variables are limited and are only helpful insofar as they help us attain practical insight into the hidden hopes and fears of our audiences. At best, demographics are but a proxy for that which no demographics can directly measure—our audiences core world-shaping values.

Grasp your customers' core values and you will have a blueprint for designing messages that inspire them. Furthermore, understand the different value-types that populate our world today, and you will have a foundation for designing packaging and marketing collateral that reaches audiences that may have before seemed completely inaccessible. Why is this? Because at the core of every human being is one simple, universal desire to enjoy life and to be of service. A person's core values provide the framework that we must engage and transcend if we hope to design messages that cut through to that one, universal core. vii

Nowhere has the pragmatic value of shifting from demographics to psychographics been more resoundingly demonstrated than with President Barack Obama's monumental presidential run. Instead of relying on traditional political wisdom about historical demographic alliances, President Obama defied to create a seamlessly branded campaign based primarily upon the core values of community, compassion, and service. From logo, to speech content, to web messaging and campaign design, every element of this remarkable marketing effort was consistently in line with these simple core values. As a result, he was able to build value-based alliances among demographic groups that had largely been considered irreconcilable based purely upon historical data. Whatever your political affiliation may be, it is hard to argue with results. Shift your thinking from demographics to psychographics, and apply this same wisdom to your company's advantage. Don't be surprised if you attract customers that market researchers might have before thought unreachable.



#8 THE NEW MATH: SUSTAINABILITY + FUN = BRAND LOYALTY

Just because the icecaps are slowly melting doesn't mean you can't still strap on the ice-skates and have some fun (metaphorically speaking). For years the airwaves have been filled with serious, messages that tend to stress people out and cause them to mentally resist taking action. As you seek to brand and market your sustainable products, why not take a different tact and make people laugh at themselves instead? Your customers will be grateful that you helped them take themselves a little less seriously, and— in the process of lightening up— they may even develop an unexpected fondness for your products and brand. Joy can do wonders for the environment, and for your bottom line.

At EDG this is a lesson we learned the tough way. For years as we promoted our environmentally friendly world-view to clients, we found ourselves bumping up against a subtle mental resistance that slowly grew disconcerting. "Oh no, another person trying to make me feel guilty for the environment." their eyes so often seemed to say from beneath an otherwise polite and welcoming face. In fact, our intention was never to spread guilt; it was to simply bring awareness and to make a difference. But still there it was— that all-too-familiar feeling of hopelessness and self-reproach. What were we to do? We didn't want to give up talking about sustainability (the rock). We didn't want to make people feel guilty either (the hard place). And then it hit us— a fun idea.

We rallied our team together and asked them to create an "Environmental Guilt Waiver," a faux legal contract bestowing the recipient with a 24-hour exemption from all existential torment in connection with the environmental crisis for making simple positive environmental choices around the office. We designed them, printed them out, and started dispensing them at business meetings. The result? People laughed. They loved it. It was like magic! After receiving the waiver, clients who might normally be resistant to discussing the environment open up more easily and take a more active interest in the topic. The whole idea of guilt disappeared in a puff of smoke and our brand as an innovative sustainable design company began to skyrocket. viii

How might some strategic levity help with your next branding project?

#9 THINK DESIGN FROM THE BEGINNING

As you can probably tell by now, effective product marketing and packaging design requires an ability to dive deep and come back with new levels of insight into the psyche of your target markets. It requires listening, feeling, exploring, flexibility, talent and at least a small dose of wit. The instantaneous assessment of your product upon the shelf of a given web or retail outlet is the product of highly complex perceptual processes that trace back to the very roots of human consciousness itself. But as complicated as all this may sound, it's actually extremely achievable as long as you begin with the end in mind, choose quality design talent to work with, and start planning for your product branding and packaging design quite early in the creative process. Too often executives wait until the last minute to fully consider their packaging design. In so doing, they lose out on tremendous opportunities for creative branding and marketing innovation that can make or break sales.

But sustainability is only as good as a business' bottom line. What good is a sustainable product or a sustainable package if no one takes the time to purchase it? How sustainable are products that no one buys simply because they don't connect emotionally with the branding and marketing of the product? Authentic, inspired design makes it easier to know which products are worth our time, and likewise, which products and services are worth our money. Give your sustainable products a chance to win the epic battle for the impulse purse strings by strategically branding them with the raw elements of human inspiration. Don't underestimate the power of human psychology— use it to your advantage. And, most importantly of all, don't wait. A well conceived branding and packaging platform starts early in the creative process, and can make the difference between a great product idea that flops, and a head-turning product that wins your company a sustainable word-of-mouth advantage.

IN CONCLUSION: A SUSTAINABLE BRAND AND PACKAGING BY ANY OTHER NAME...

We are all too aware that many of the suggestions contained in this paper are easier said than done. After all, talking about innovation is always a heck of a lot easier than actually doing it. But does that mean we shouldn't keep trying? Of course not. If the Eskimos have 40 words for snow, shouldn't we have just as many words for the subtle ways in which designs influence the way we experience the world? Being human is a symphonic experience in which our brain constantly composes beauty from the ceaseless orchestra of our 5 senses. Even in sleep our brain is making sense through dreams that pave the way for our groggy morning coffee, and another sense-bombarding day. Sense making is what we humans do.

The real question is this: What are we focusing on? How do we choose to invest the precious gift of our 5 senses so that we can improve the quality of life for others and ourselves? Together we can use our wits and ingenuity to fashion an economy driven by service over gamesmanship, and sustainability over greed. Perhaps at the end of our efforts we'll see that innovation and inspiration are the prized commodities, that all the gold in Fort Knox and all the tea in China were originally intended to bring. Why not cut to the chase and build sustainability into the very products and services that fulfill our daily needs?

- i. Point of Purchase Advertising Institute Consumer Buying Habits Study, 1999. See also Thompson, L. 1996. "Lifting the Lid on Packaging Research", The Journal of Brand Management, Vol. 3 No. 5 pp. 289-95.
- ii. Hanlon, P. 2006. "PrimalBranding: Create Zealots for Your Brand, Your Company, Your Future."
- iii. For an excellent discussion see Wallace, R. 2001. "Proving Our Value: Measuring Package Design's Return on Investment" Design Management Journal, Vol. 12, No. 3 pp 20 -27
- iv. Visit <http://www.prsresearch.com/> for more info
- v. See CG Jung and Hull, F. C. 1981. "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious" (Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol.9 Part 1)
- vi. For details on this research, and the influence of subconscious factors on consumer perception see Rapaille, C. 2007. The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do
- vii. For a detailed elaboration of value-systems and their implications for communication design see Roberts, J. M. 2008 Igniting Inspiration: A Persuasion Manual for Visionaries (or visit www.jmarshallroberts.com)
- viii. Visit http://www.sustainablelifemedia.com/content/column/strategy/six_strategies_for_inspiring_environmental_change

