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Blood, Sweat and Tiers: Building Optimal Brand Identity Architectures

by Rob Wallace | June 19, 2008

Brand extensions are more than twice as likely to succeed as new brands. With mega-brands like Crest extending to more than 80 SKUs in the United States alone and over 300 products worldwide, today's brands are not just expanding—they are hyper-proliferating.

Brand identity architectures—and the design strategies that define them—are rarely planned to accommodate this hyperbolic explosion. In an effort to differentiate their various tiers, firms may use design strategies that overstep their needs. In the best cases, these ill-planned design architectures close the door on future brand growth. In the worst cases, over-extended design architectures actually denigrate the base brand's integrity.

The most successful brands leverage their relevance across a number of meaningful experiences, attracting a broad range of consumer profiles without eroding the brand's essence. In their initial evolution, brands offer core users variations of the same experience. As they grow, many brands offer core consumers completely new, but relevant experiences. When they are more fully evolved, idealized brands leverage their core attributes to both new consumers and new experiences. And when a brand's values become so richly engrained in the culture, the brand's reputation can credibly endorse unrelated brands, too, while still building on base-brand credibility.

Certainly not all brands are relevant enough, nor all brand experiences rich enough, to extend to all tiers. Regardless, all ideal brand identity architectures effectively differentiate each brand offering while actually building on the brand's integrity. In this article, we'll show how it's done by using two examples: the first is Lean Cuisine, an actual, established brand of frozen entrees, and Sunshine Grove, a fictional brand of orange juice created for illustrative purposes.

Hierarchy of design strategies: colors, shapes, numbers, words

Audiences typically respond to a specific hierarchy of communication. In this hierarchy, visual language is far more eloquent than verbal communication. In visual communication, color is first element observed, generating the most immediate visceral and emotional response. Successful design architecture's single most effective strategy is to establish a distinctive color relevant to the brand experience and use that color consistently. Changing brand color should only be reserved for the highest level of differentiation.

When design architecture is consistent, as in the Lean Cuisine example, even subtle tertiary uses of color can have a meaningful impact.

Well-planned design architectures might use **color** in a number of primary, secondary and even tertiary strategies. For example, the white color is Lean Cuisine’s core brand mnemonic used consistently across all products, while the very subtle use of supportive colors effectively segments the brand tiers.

Shape is the second most recognized visual strategy. Again, shape can be part of the primary (i.e., package structure), secondary (layout of graphic elements) and tertiary strategies (brand logos or icons). Using the Lean Cuisine example, the layout of elements remains identical across more than 100 SKUs. Each element is in exactly the same “staging area,” resulting in a recognizable brand shape that helps consumers navigate quickly. The package structure or layout shape only changes to differentiate very unique brand offerings.

Numbers are the third most immediately recognized strategy. Numbers are most effective for differentiating good/better/best brand tiers. For instance, most consumers recognize the value differences between 200-, 500- and 700-series automobiles.

Words are the last to be recognized and the least visceral of all cues, and therefore should not be relied on to create meaningful differentiation across the brand. As in Lean Cuisine’s case, brand segment names, such as Everyday Favorites and Café Classics, are relatively small, allowing the distinctive color bands that wrap them to signal each tier more effectively.

Putting best practice to use

What follows is an outline of sequential best practices for building optimized brand identity architectures. Ten possible tiers are defined both by the criteria used to determine their place in the brand hierarchy and by some of the design strategies used to best achieve their balanced, branded differentiation.

Lean Cuisine and Stouffer's (both owned by Nestlé), as well as our fictional Sunshine Grove brand of juices, are referred to as mentors. Note that they are used exclusively to exemplify branding strategy. These examples may not be actual products nor do they indicate Nestlé's desires to extend their brands. They are used as hypothetical examples, purely to illustrate each tier of a balanced brand architecture.

TIER ONE: The base brand and its flavors/fragrances

Key criteria: Same consumer, same experience

The base brand delivers the core brand experience to the core consumer profile in any number of flavors, fragrances, sizes, etc. Each alternative is just a different way of delivering the same benefits and same experience to the same consumer.

Design strategy: Product presentation and tertiary color cues

Only the fruit illustration and subtle, tertiary color cues change to differentiate between juice flavors. All other elements, including the signature illustration style, remain the same.

The most effective design architectures, specifically those for food products, make the product "the hero," using a representation of the product as the most prominent visual element. In combination with a relatively small flavor/fragrance name, product presentation can often provide the appropriate level of differentiation between these variants. When photography and flavor name alone are not enough, tertiary color cues might be used in a subtle way that does not erode the primary brand color mnemonic. However, all other primary elements of the architecture (logo, primary and secondary color, the consistent "staging area" of elements, etc.) should remain consistent.

SUB-TIER ONE: A unique claim/benefit/promotion

Key criteria: Same consumer, same experience—with one unique benefit

Products within the base brand that offer a single unique benefit, promotion or cause-marketing effort may justify a subtle level of differentiation. Whole grains, fragrance-free, breast cancer affinity, for example, all might deserve awareness, but need to be balanced within the primary brand experience. Since this is still a Tier One level of differentiation it does not warrant significant distinction from the base-brand.

Design strategy: Violators

Violators must be designed with the same level of care and craftsmanship as every other element of the identity. Staging areas should be dedicated for violators that do not overlap product presentation or clutter key brand messaging. Importantly, violators should attract attention without denigrating the brand. Big, bold bursts may be eye-catching but can seriously erode quality perceptions and betray brand integrity. Most importantly, violators must be used sparingly, limited to one key message. Identities that already use a key benefit violator should not use a second violator for promotional purposes. In this case, marketers must decide which is most important—the key benefit, the cause marketing or the promotion—and replace one with the other.

The addition of red banners and Target's iconic logo create an adequate distinction for this product, sold only at Target.

TIER TWO: Retailer-specific products

Key criteria: Perceived differences in identical products

Retailers increasingly require their corporate partners to offer unique products exclusively dedicated to their account. These requirements go beyond count size and muti-packs. In this case, the product is identical, the brand experience and the consumer profile are also identical, but the design must evoke a perceived distinction from identical brand offerings sold by different retailers.

Design strategy: Add subtle visual cues

The brand owner's goal is to make the most minimal change that satisfies the retailer. Brands may highlight a specific ingredient or fragrance that provides the "reason to believe" this perceived difference. However, when the retailer is more insistent on having the design reflect its own aesthetic (i.e., make it look more "Target"), a more evolved change in the layout of elements or their staging areas can achieve the appropriate perception. It is critical, however, that the brand logo, primary and secondary color, typefaces, package structure and product presentation should remain identical, thereby reserving those higher level strategies for more truly differentiated brand experiences.

TIER THREE: Acceptable exceptions: temporary differentiation for new SKUs

Key criteria: Same consumer, new variation on same experience

New flavors, fragrances or forms sometimes need to stand out from the base brand for a period of time, but both the experience and targeted consumers should be identical to the existing brand tier. In order to draw attention to new product offerings, design architectures must provide for the flexibility of "breaking the rules," providing that all design elements revert back to the standard base-brand architecture after a six-month introductory period. This allows future products to use the same acceptable strategies during launch.

(Left) The flag and the blue banner in the design are acceptable interruptions of the design architecture, as long as they revert back to their original place in the hierarchy (at right).

Acceptable exceptions should be created for each tier of the architecture. Again, by establishing these visual strategies before new products are launched, the brand will have a roadmap for future growth.

Design strategy: Tweak the layout

The overall goal is to make these new products stand out without changing consumer perceptions about the brand. And since they will revert to the base-brand design, these exceptions should be easy and inexpensive to change back. Therefore, product presentation and photography should remain consistent.

Although small, the Sunkist logo is recognizable. By controlling the size of each element and its impact on the communication hierarchy, the design architecture can continue to accommodate future brand tiers.

TIER FOUR: Branded ingredients

Key criteria: Same consumer and experience, while leveraging another brand

Well-recognized brands are often adopted as a value-added ingredient to the base-brand experience (think Dell computers with "Intel inside" or Breyer's ice cream "with Oreo pieces.") Strategically, the base-brand adopts a small portion of the ingredient brand's equity, but the base-brand experience and its audience does not change.

Design strategy: Ingredient-extractable branding unit

Procter & Gamble refers to a recognized brand logo, color, icon and holding device as an Extractable Branding Unit. (EBU). In our example, Sunkist's arched blue logo is its recognized EBU. Ideally, the ingredient brand's EBU should take a prominent place in the base-brand architecture and should be somewhat disruptive to the design system, almost like a violator. While this element violates, it should be careful not to denigrate the base-brand perception or interrupt other elements of the communication hierarchy.

Note: As previously mentioned, violators must be designed with care and used sparingly. In design architectures that already have a claim violator, the ingredient brand descriptor must replace this element. An ideal design architecture has only one most important claim, and usually the recognized ingredient brand is more important than any other promotion or claim benefit.

TIER FIVE: Brand Segments

Key criteria: New consumer, with variation of the experience

Evolved brands may have a set of products that warrant stronger differentiation from the base brand. For example, Lean Cuisine has a series of Asian-inspired flavors while Stouffers has both individual serving and family-sized segments. A brand may well have several such segments within it.

Brand segments are the first true level of meaningful differentiation from the base brand. They offer a variation of the base-brand experience to a new consumer profile.

In some cases the segment benefit actually elevates the overall quality perception of the base-brand, allowing marketers to justify a higher price for this segment.

To attract a new audience and signal its new vitamin-enriched benefit, both the Centrum Silver logo and product illustration change to reflect Centrum's core equities and a more premium experience.

Design strategy: Product styling and stylized type elements

In addition to optional new segment names (i.e., "Asian Inspirations"), brand segments are often best differentiated through a change in product presentation. For example, the photo styling for an Asian segment may simply add chopsticks or an Asian placemat. If that does not generate enough distinction, the segment name might be highlighted with a stylized type. However, primary color and all other elements should remain as consistent with the base as possible, reserving those more prominent strategies for more differentiated brand tiers.

TIER SIX: Value-added increments: good/better/best

Key criteria: New consumers and value-added experiences

Robust brands can often support value-based, value-added, premium and often super-premium variations of the brand experience. In addition to their differing price points, value-added increments are often also differentiated by consumer target (kids/all-family/adults-only) and/or product usage (different eating occasion/mealtime or light/medium/heavy duty, etc.).

Design strategy: Primary/secondary color and photo styling

Stronger visual cues are required to evoke different product

Primary color, product presentation and print techniques combine to distinguish between value offerings. Gold and matte-black caps also reinforce the better/best associations.

usage associations such as evoking everyday, special and premium occasions. Food products might change the style of the plate, silverware and/or table setting. Personal care products might indicate their origin or “sense of place.” In addition, a more involved change in color might also support good/better/best differentiation.

Some architectures amplify differentiation through print technologies and package substrates that support the value premise. The same design elements reproduced using specialty print techniques can provide immediate and meaningful distinction.

Design architectures must differentiate between “good/better/best” experiences without denigrating the “good.” Again, a high level of design craftsmanship is required to create this ideal perceptual balance.

TIER SEVEN: Brand forms: New delivery systems/usage associations

Key criteria: New consumers, but a significantly different experience

A change in product delivery or preparation technique, or a dramatically unique usage experience, constitutes a brand form. A brand form is so meaningfully different from the base brand that it attracts new consumers for whom the base brand may not have been otherwise relevant. For example, an “organic” form not only evokes a significantly new experience but actually attracts a very different consumer profile.

Again, because its differentiation is more apparent, a brand form can have any number of flavors and or segments within it and still, if appropriately designed, leverage the base brand’s equities.

Without sacrificing the base brand's core equities, a new green background and more matte substrate communicate this product as a unique experience.

Design strategy: Primary/secondary color, stylized type and package substrate

Brand forms often warrant larger, secondary brand descriptors (i.e., organic) and this type can be highly stylized, evoking its unique experience. Even more prominent differentiation can come from changing the primary background color to signal its core benefit. Lastly, a new tactile feel to the package can generate immediate distinction. For example, the carton stock used for Sunshine Grove Organic could have a less glossy, more tactile feel to support its natural message.

TIER EIGHT: Sub-brands: Combining two experiences

Key criteria: Significantly new consumer/dramatic new experience

When launching a new product that is built upon on a base brand’s perceptual foundation yet offering a significantly new experience to a new target, an

The stylized "Nectar" logo takes prominence over the base-brand identity and the imagery signals a new experience, but the reduced, quart-size carton is the most powerful visual cue.

increasingly distinctive level of differentiation is required.

For example, adding a line of nectars to the hypothetical Sunshine Grove juice brand would warrant sub-brand status. In this case, the design must attract new users and signal to core users that this is not the same base-brand experience.

Design strategy: Shape, secondary logo, color, photo styling

Significantly changing the package shape and/or its substrate (i.e., a glass bottle vs. a carton) generates such an immediate distinction that this can often be a sufficient strategy alone to evoke a dramatically different experience. However, in order to truly differentiate a sub-brand, a second logo is warranted, marking the first time in the architecture that the size of the base-brand logo can be reduced in visual prominence and the staging area.

Design best practice requires that the brand and sub-brand logos not to be the same size but balanced in a 60/40, 70/30, 80/20 or similar relationship. This visual balance is determined by how much of the base-brand experience is leveraged. Using our hypothetical Sunshine Grove example, nectars might be more relevant to base-brand equities (60 sub-brand/40 brand), while fruit-flavored breath mints might be less base-brand relevant (80 sub-brand/20 brand).

TIER NINE: Co-branding: Morphing two different brands

Key criteria: Two unrelated experiences becoming one

Acquisition and co-creation may prompt the need for merging two very different identities, two very different target consumers and two very different experiences into one brand.

In its initial form, the package might actually have two brand names and logos. This is confusing and therefore only commonly used as a transition strategy while the weaker or acquired brand is morphed into the stronger brand's identity. For example, Nabisco and Post did this successfully when the former Nabisco cereals adopted the Post brand. Over time, the brand identity transitions into the dominant brand's architecture.

If Sunshine Grove acquired Jamba Juice, it might capitalize on Jamba Juice's core equities (logo, stylized wings illustration.

Design strategy: Stronger brand's color/layout with second brand's logo

In that this is only a transitional strategy, the stronger or acquiring brand's core mnemonics are most heavily leveraged; but the second brand's logo and extractable branding unit is added initially as a prominent feature. During the transition, the second brand logo unit can be reduced in size and eventually be removed from the newly unified brand.

handcrafted type).

This new frozen novelty brand leverages almost every element of the base brand's design architecture and retains its integrity by appealing to the adult purchaser, not the child consumer.

TIER TEN: Endorsed brands: Leveraging brand integrity

Key criteria: Dramatically different consumers and experiences

The most effective brands are able to extend their relevance to completely unrelated products, attracting dramatically new audiences and evoking significantly different consumer experiences. For example, in the prototype project, the Sunshine Grove juice brand can successfully extend into the frozen novelty category offering a "better for you" dessert to kids through health-conscious, gatekeeper moms. The resulting endorsed brand architecture must, in itself, be flexible enough to accommodate flavor, segment, form, value-based and other future proliferations.

Design strategy: Leverage base-brand core mnemonics

The elements of the endorsing base-brand's core identity should never be disassociated or compromised. In order to stand out among the brighly colored packages in the frozen novelties section, our hypothetical branders might want to leverage only the Sunshine Grove logo but not the brand's other core mnemonics (white background, stylized product-illustration style). Although that might benefit the frozen novelty brand, it would certainly denigrate the base brand and should therefore be avoided.

A plea for simplification and consistency

As brands grow and their communication becomes increasingly complex, only the single most important brand message warrants communication on the package's front panel. Limiting brand messages simplifies the shopping experience and creates affinity with the brand. Color, texture, typography and layout all speak an immediate, visceral language. Use them wisely and eliminate extraneous words. Side, top and back panels are the appropriate staging areas for your secondary brand messages, and even those should be strictly limited to the one or two that are unique to your brand and meaningfully different from your competition. Less is truly more.

Lastly, architecting brand identity is hard work and requires a disciplined, long view of the brand's potential growth. Smart marketers will err on the side of consistency, saving more pronounced design strategies for future brand experiences that truly demand them. Smart designers will lead them there.

Plan your brand identity's growth cautiously, protect your core mnemonics, don't use design strategies that overstep their intended tier, and then you'll find the perfect balance of branded differentiation.

About the Author: Rob Wallace is managing partner of Wallace Church, a Manhattan-based global design and brand strategy consultancy. With his partners Stan Church and Stacey Kelley, Wallace has helped to build brands for such clients as Kraft, Gillette, Kodak, Unilever and General Mills. He is actively involved with the Design Management Institute, AIGA and the Institute for International Research and is a frequent speaker at industry events and as a part of the Columbia University MBA program. Wallace sees his primary goal as proving that package design/brand identity is the single most influential and cost-effective marketing tool.