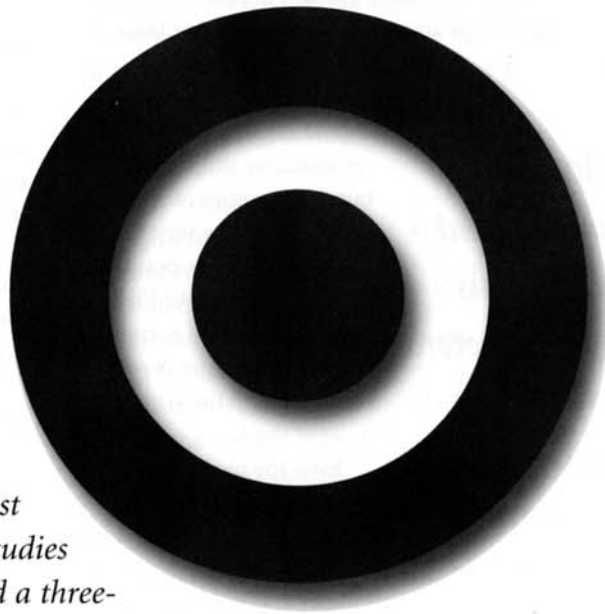


Be Smart, Be Simple

by Rob Wallace

Today's world is cluttered with messages. In this environment, Rob Wallace urges simplicity. Powerful brands cut through perceptual noise with a memorably iconic and minimalist approach to colors and symbols. Case studies amplify the principles he advocates, and a three-step process outlines specific criteria managers can use to build designs that are visually clean and engaging.



"Simplicity is complexity resolved."

—Constantin Brancusi,
Romanian minimalist sculptor

What's the common thread that unifies the best brand identities? Quick—think of Target. What immediately comes to mind? If you're like many people, you thought of Target's red, iconic symbol. Do you remember anything else about their ads? How quickly can you distinguish a Target message from other messages?

How about Cingular? What color and shape comes to mind? What does that brand stand for? On the product design side, picture OXO Good Grips hand-held appliances. What rational



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and emotional connections does that brand evoke? How did OXO take ergonomics and elevate it to the status of a brand icon?

How is it that all these powerful brands connect so instantly, so deeply with their core consumers? Each of them uses a singular visual focus with a distinctive palette of colors and icons and lots of white space. Each strongly stands for *one thing*. By simplifying their message, they not only cut through the clutter, but they also encourage consumers to bring their own personal interpretations to the brand.

Over-Extension = Clutter = Confusion

In today's information-overloaded culture, where brands have proliferated like rabbits, the mass retail environment has become visual junk food, leaving us overfed and undernourished.

To help their own brands stand out against this cacophony, marketers are increasingly challenged to find an as-yet-unmet consumer need or a truly distinctive product benefit. Saying this is difficult is an understatement. Rather than

invent a new mousetrap, most marketers would choose the line of least resistance by simply bundling a series of brand benefits in a new way. Well—that may be easier, but it is also less effective. Adding more to the brand message simply complicates it and only amplifies the visual noise at shelf.

Even the most astute marketers fall into this trap. Look at Crest toothpaste, for example. In the early 1980s, Procter & Gamble offered Crest in a handful of well-segmented primary variants. Today, the brand extends to well over a dozen variants in nine flavors and more than

80 SKUs worldwide. Many of these products re-bundle the same set of benefits. Do we really need Crest Whitening Plus Scope Citrus Splash when we have Crest Whitening Expressions Lemon Ice?

These complex brand messages not only get lost, they also confuse consumers: "Damn, does Tom like Strong Mint, Mild Mint, or Peppermint? Oh, wait—what about Vanilla Mint?" In the best case, this confusion merely disengages consumers. In the worst case, they buy another, simpler brand.

Simple Is the New Better

An emerging trend to combat this visual chatter has now hit the mainstream. The most successful brands are able to connect with their core enthusiasts by using an effective visual shorthand.

Using color, symbols, icons, and a singular focus, these brands cut through the visual noise. The key strategy they share is simplicity—in their messages, their identities, and their communications architectures.

Proven by Science

New consumer behavior science supports the trend toward simplification. Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, *Blink*, sets out to prove how we, as twenty-first-century human beings, respond to stimuli. His research suggests that we "thin-slice" through the myriad of messages that bombard us constantly. We filter out everything except the most meaningful visual message—the one that strikes us on an emotional level.

Gladwell's research contends that this instantaneous reaction goes far beyond the choices we make about which brand to buy—in fact, it drives all our decisions.

Prove this to yourself. Monitor your own personal decisions, specifically those that surround your brand choices. If you're like me, you walk into a well-constructed retail experience with the intent to purchase five things, but you walk out with 15. Gladwell would have you believe that 10 of those purchase decisions were made in a single instant, at an instinctive level, inspired by simple visual cues.

Proven in the Real World

Simplicity is not a fad or even a trend, but a tectonic shift in both consumer experience and brand culture. Here's why. When a brand experience is stripped of all its prescriptive messages, the consumer must engage it in a highly personal way. A simple visual icon, versus lots of words, allows for individual interpretation—a sense of individual "realness." In a "my space" consumer culture that increasingly demands personalized brand experiences, this individual interpretation becomes all the more important. In a society of mass customization, only the simple can become the "my."

Even the Simple Have Become Simpler

If you are looking for an early influencer of the shift to simple, there's no better mentor than Apple. Its undisputed success has strongly influenced both product and brand identity design. Everywhere you look, there's yet another cleaner,

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less encumbered user interface. Call it the iPodization of our world.

But even Apple is constantly seeking to become more intuitive, more eloquently simple. Take a look at how the company promotes the new Nano. Apple certainly evokes its product's distinctly simple consumer experience by leveraging the Nano's intuitive design. But what object did Apple choose to emphasize the Nano's tiny size and ultra-slimness? A pencil—perhaps our most elementary tool. Simply brilliant (Figure 1).

We've begun to define technology's value based not on how comprehensive it is, but on how simple it is to use. Look, for example, at the web's most often used—and, arguably, most technical—site, Google. Is it any wonder that its uniquely simple user interface and unadorned aesthetic so quickly left Alta Vista, Excite, Lycos, and all the other web crawlers in the crawling stage?

There's been much acclaim for new brands, such as Method Home Care and Level One Vodka, which have redefined the competitive landscape with a simple design aesthetic. But you really know that a trend shift has taken root when it's embraced by the huge behemoths. Study the recent evolution of the H&R Block identity or the new AT&T brand icon. These mega-brands took a risk when they reformed under a simpler aesthetic, but that risk connects

them more immediately, more viscerally with their consumers, and it will reward them with a huge ROI (Figure 2).

Nestlé Embraces the Simple

Let's illustrate this process through a real-world case history. Last year, Nestlé sought to optimize its Lean Cuisine brand experience. The brand was the category leader, but sales had flattened. The new charter was to launch new flavors and increase shopability through the proper hierarchy of product forms and flavors. More important, the brand was to re-engage consumers through a perception of contemporary wellness.

Research analysis showed that the old brand identity was trying too hard. In an effort to communicate its benefits, the brand perception was cluttered, complicated, and somewhat "dirty" (Figure 3 on page 22). The old packaging certainly did not communicate the strong emotional cues relevant for a leader in the wellness category.

With an eye to Wallace Church's strategic recommendations, Nestlé's team of design managers and marketers began by accepting the value of a

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Figure 1. Quite possibly the single most successful brand expression of our time, Apple continues to reinvent its brand messaging in an ever-simpler visual language.



Figure 2. When mega brand marketers like AT&T, Nestle, and Schering-Plough take up the "simple" banner, you know this is not a trend but a tectonic shift in consumer visual literacy.

simple visual brand focus. Driven by current consumer perceptions of healthy eating, they eliminated nonessential messages and moved secondary claims to the back and side panels.

A new, cleaner photo aesthetic, a single, simpler type strategy, a revitalized logo, and a more open architecture proved to best evoke desired perceptions and allowed consumers to more easily identify the product at the store. Moving the logo to the bottom of the pack—normally a design taboo—allowed the food to

be the “hero,” another unique distinction from traditional category cues (Figure 4).

Initial sales results indicate that this strategy is driving one of Nestlé’s most successful product restages. Overall Lean Cuisine brand sales have increased, led by the new product offerings. Amanda Bach, Nestlé Prepared Foods Company’s packaging communication design manager, comments: “Simplifying the Lean Cuisine identity allowed us to recapture the brand’s equities, drive shelf impact, and by color



Figure 3. Lean Cuisine’s original design system used a number of fonts, a profusion of messages, and product photography that was over-stylized. As a result, the brand presence was cluttered, messy, and hard to shop.



Figure 4. Simplifying the design architecture revitalized the Lean Cuisine brand, enhancing the brand’s impact at retail and improving shopability. Increased sales prove that this new, simple design connects immediately and emotionally with consumers.

coding, helped enhance shopability. I truly believe that this new simpler, cleaner brand aesthetic will help consumers reconnect with the brand on an emotional level.”

Simple Works in Every Category

It might seem easy to be simple when you can control your brand messages. But how can a brand be simple when the government dictates its messages and regulates the size and placement of its copy? The over-the-counter drug category is required by the FDA to use mandatory language in specified type sizes and adjacencies. These prescriptive dictates often result in the industry’s most cluttered packages and therefore the category that consumers often find hardest to shop.

When Schering-Plough launched its successful Claritin brand as an over-the-counter brand, Wallace Church was again called in to help determine how to define and visually communicate this brand’s simple end benefit of “clear energy.” A vibrant blue sky, controlled typestyles, and a clean layout of elements allow the consumer to see past the regulatory copy and experience

the clarity of a beautiful day. The rolling hills provide a long, clear, simple perspective. Bold color blocking and simple pill-form icons provide a visual shorthand that connects more immediately, more emotionally, and more effectively with consumers. Schering-Plough credits this as one of the industry’s most successful Rx/OTC transitions, thanks in great part to the simplicity of Claritin’s identity design (Figure 5).

Three Steps to Simplicity

If simplifying brand messaging and identity is so successful, why aren’t more brands doing it? Quite simply, because being simple ain’t so simple. It’s difficult for traditional marketers to abandon their verbal vocabulary and embrace a new visual language.

However, smarter marketers understand that the best brands thin-slice their messaging and communicate one thing very well rather than two or three things poorly. These brands communicate through imagery rather than words, and connect with consumers more successfully as a result.

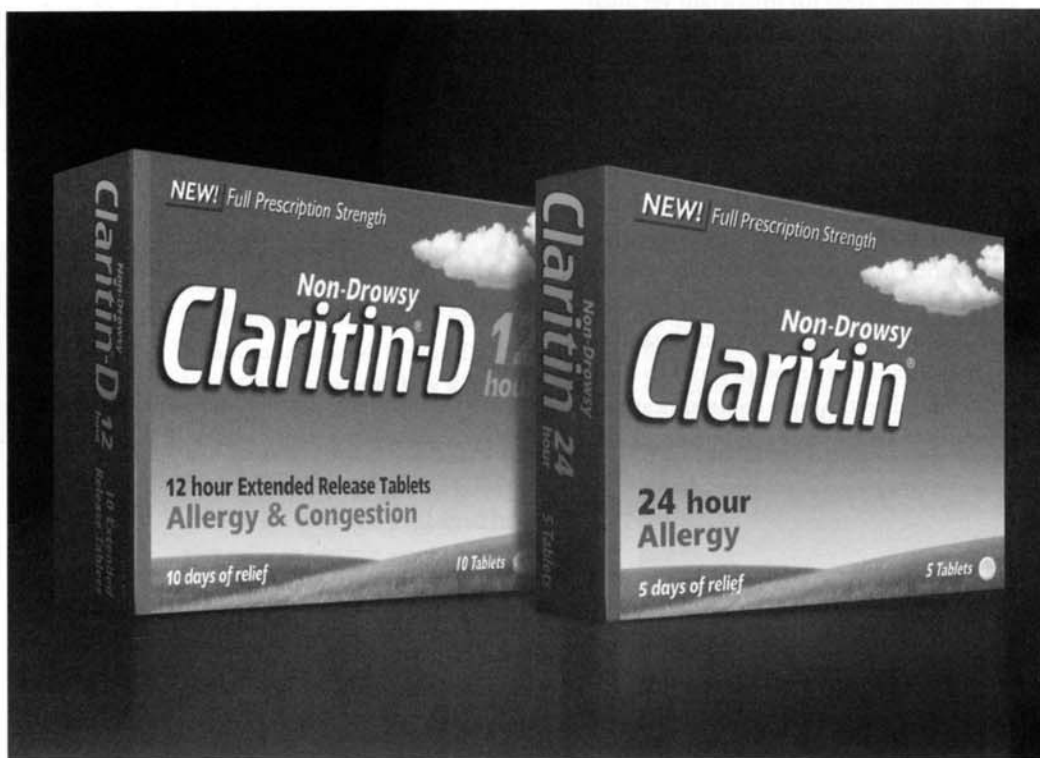


Figure 5. Simplicity has a meaningful role even in OTC drug brands, where the government requires lots of regulatory copy in prominent sizes and also requires certain adjacencies

So how do you go simple? That's easy.

Step One: Hone your positioning down to its one most critical element. If you can't express your brand's unique reason for being in fewer than five words, you're not done with your positioning. Once you've defined it, stick to it. Move all the secondary brand messages off the front panel.

Step Two: Visualize your positioning. Before beginning brand identity/packaging or any brand communications effort, convert your positioning statement into the colors, shapes, typestyles, and graphics that best evoke the brand experience. Research this visual shorthand with your positioning statement to confirm those few select visual elements that best communicate your brand experience.

Step Three: Resist the urge to fill the white space. Select a small, proprietary palette of colors, typestyles, and graphic elements from which to build your brand identity architecture. Consider your back, top, and side panels as the staging areas for important yet ancillary claims. If the face panel is clean, uncluttered, and engaging, consumers will pick up your package, turn it around, and read all those additional messages.

Prove this to yourself. Follow the above guidelines and simplify your brand's messages and its visual identity. Monitor how this affects brand sales and consumer perceptions. Then prove this to your organization. Become your organization's simplification champion. Prove to them the value that direct, simple communication has in twenty-first-century consumer culture.

When in doubt: "Think big, go small. Be smart, be simple." ■

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