

First Things First!

New Branding and Design for New Businesses



What comes first is an idea. Like that of an L.A.-inspired juice bar for Berlin. Or the perfect place to serve Polish pierogis. Then, at some point, the shopper comes into play, spoilt for choice and severely style-conscious; the so-called curator-consumers look beyond large billboards, busy high streets and supermarket shelves to find delight in alternative brands with fresh identities. Be it a jar of jam or a fresh bouquet from a favorite florist—wrapped up with labels, logos, letterings, the things we buy and surround ourselves with have long become symbols of aesthetic self-creation; consumption: a mode of self-expression. And considering the creative concepts that enrich the branded products on offer, it becomes pretty clear that entrepreneurship, too, is intertwined with self-promotion.

“My cheese and I myself as a person must mature, which is why I want a brand that is able to mature, too,” said the Austrian cheese maker Anton Sutterlüty, when asking Riebenbauer Design for a rebrand. (→ PP. 212–215) Increasingly committed to bestowing a personal imprint on their burgeoning brands,

entrepreneurs like Sutterlüty have come to think of their company as a very intimate venture, or even as an extension of themselves. “There shall be no disparities between my product, my brand and myself,” Sutterlüty told Riebenbauer Design, who developed a brand that clearly harks back to the heritage of his family business, and to a production process that has not changed much since the middle ages. Sutterlüty’s cheese now comes hand-wrapped in thick brown canvas. He himself wears an old-style apron made of the same material, screen-printed with plain white letters.

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In times of perfectly shrink-wrapped processed cheese slices and refined, re-sealable fresh packs, the relatively artless authenticity of Sutterlüty’s brand takes on an air of sophistication. Along these lines, the simple brown bag is celebrating a revival in contemporary branding. And bare bulky bottles, formerly depreciated as the “Bull Terriers” of beer, are surely as “back” as the dark ales they have once been designed for. On the other hand, there is a whole new wave of elaborately embossed, neo-Victorian labels, and a foible for artisanship. A growing amount of new-fangled brands are making use of old-style techniques, like stamping or letter-press printing. Perhaps not so much a sign of nostalgia than an honest appreciation of period craftsmanship, branding today attempts to reconcile the reliable past with a wavering present. By its very nature, branding is an ephemeral business—especially now that goods and graphics are consumed with greed and haste, and new hypes both pop-up and die-down in an instant. But coming of age and a long way through both golden and turbulent decades, the discipline has long learned to grant new lease to old charms.

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Initially understood as a way of transforming abstract business concepts into visual, preferably very palpable means, the responsibilities of modern-day branding may reach far beyond print matters, steer back into intangible realms, and provisionally be pooled under the unwieldy catchphrase “corporate culture.” But since declared dead, print has also assumed a special status in branding, encouraging designers to carefully select paper stocks, and work with tactile finishings, such as die cuts or foil coatings. In the face of digital profiles and web communications, old visual identity staples, like letterheads and business cards may have lost significance, or even seem obsolete—but they have also gained new-found value and a lot of attention. Not least because many put brilliant ideas onto paper. Take the colorful cards and labels Hey Studio has designed for the Miami-based jam makers Jammy Yummy: With randomly distributed perforations, they playfully suggest the constant nibbling Jammy Yummy’s sweet snacks provoke. (→ PP. 218–219) In translating a company’s intrinsic values into intriguing visuals, today’s brands communicate idiosyncrasies and individuality. Technically, most are based on close, creative teamwork.

“Finding people that share and believe in your vision is one of the hardest things in setting up a fruitful business,” shares

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celebrity chef Shane Delia, who found Melbourne-based Confetti Studio to be the perfect partners to brand his flagship restaurant Maha. (→ PP. 176–177) Drawing on the experimental foreignness of Delia’s cookery, the designers developed a middle eastern aesthetic based on a florid Arabic script, strokes of which reappear in an infinitely-repeating pattern that extends from the restaurant’s printed collateral over to the interior to a packaging system for its own range of products. Today, only a versatile, tailor-made brand is a valuable one. Or as Delia puts it, “Any brand is a living entity, that needs love, passion, dedication, consideration and a trusted team to fully develop and grow.”

“The old idea of design as a sort of streamlining dies hard,” once claimed the attendees of the Design Congress in London, back in the early days of corporate branding. In promoting the role of a designer as a critical analyst, involved in a brand’s creative process from the start, they called for creatives to take on more responsibility, and encouraged management departments to work at eye level with the graphic guild. Generations later, brand identities are generally understood to not merely reflect, but at best also to contribute to a business concept and forge a company’s identity. But while big corporations invest fortunes into creative offices with hefty hierarchies and in-house climbing walls, it is mainly small enterprises that surprise us with smart solutions. Edged on by the tricky task to attract the attention of image-savvy, severely-sated consumers, today’s creative entrepreneurs and designers take it on with wit and astonishing confidence.

The brands featured in this book tell stories of personal ventures and of visual pioneers. It is a book of new design directions. Of a return to traditional values, and a rejection of the corporate cool. Some counter our image-cluttered era with striking simplicity, and the artistic appeal of minimalist still life photography. Others celebrate imperfection, lashing out against the fast-paced, polished productions of large chains and corporations. More often than not, branded identities counter the affluent consumer society’s throwaway mentality with sustainable solutions. And without an exception, they illustrate that effective branding goes far beyond style, custom fonts and corporate colors. The old idea of branding as a secondary, streamlining service may have died a slow, ailing death. But the time is here to bury it with graphic grandeur.