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# Designing Global Brands: Critical Lessons

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# Designing global brands:

## Critical lessons

by Larry Roellig

**T**he principle is that a global brand requires the building of compelling relationships across a diverse

spectrum of brand audiences. Larry Roellig interprets this general mandate as the consideration of seven arenas that range from packaging and marketing to culture and the environment. In each, he explores the design challenges corporations must address if their products and services are to have an effective presence around the world.



What is branding and why is it important? Although nonprofessionals may think of a brand as just a logo or a package, it is really an aggregation of all the physical and emotional characteristics of a company, a product, or a service encountered by the consumer at all points of contact. Branding is important because it communicates a brand's business proposition and, hopefully, a reason why a consumer should desire the product represented by the brand. The most successful visual expressions of a brand embrace its core attributes and seek to establish a positive emotional relationship between the brand and its audiences, both internal and external (figure 1). Building a local, regional, or national brand with a clearly defined and understood target audience is difficult enough, but the challenges increase geometrically when

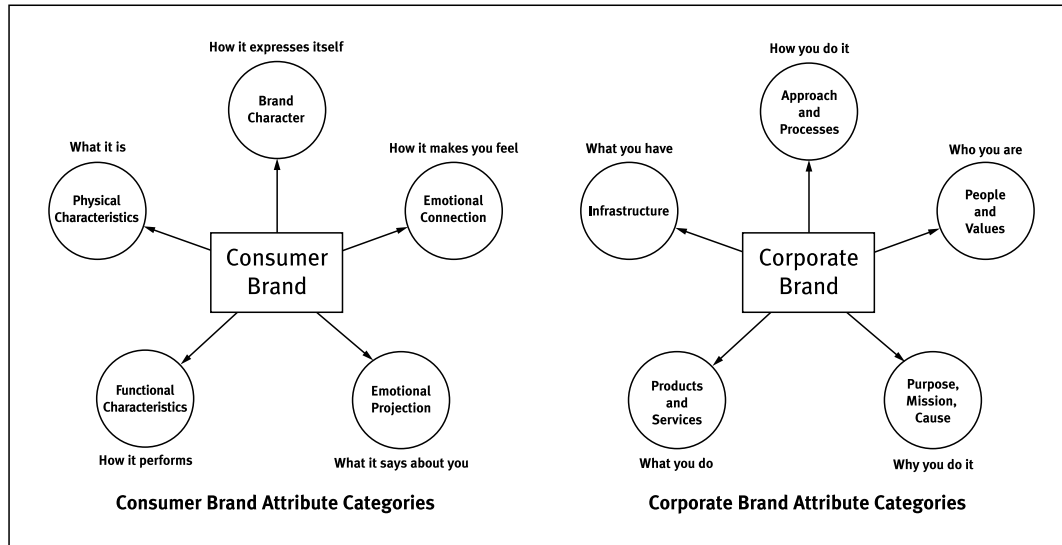


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a global brand is at stake.

In this article, I hope to highlight the numerous strategic and tactical considerations to keep in mind when producing a global brand expression. Before a solid foundation can be established, companies must determine the brand's core attributes, personality, and positioning by appraising its market category, target consumers, and competitors, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of their own employees. In addition, governmental legislation and taxation, political issues, social and environmental pressures, cultural differences, local customs, religious restrictions, consumer tastes, and different languages will need to be considered. Accounting for all these details in one worldwide brand is no small feat and, while it is often attempted, it is truly achieved by only a few consumer brands.

Figure 1.



The components of consumer and corporate brands may differ, but both offer positioning options ranging from physical and tangible to intangible and emotional.

**Lesson 1: Creation of a captivating name and wordmark, or symbol**

The first and foremost element that needs to be taken into consideration when creating a global brand is the name and the related wordmark, or symbol, that will be used to represent the company, product, or service throughout the world. The name must be pronounceable in all languages and dialects, free of negative connotations, and not confusingly similar to existing names. This is not so difficult for most corporate brand names, such as McDonald’s, Ford, or Visa, but finding a multi-lingual product or service brand name that stands out from the crowd and works with equal success in all countries and cultures is a much trickier proposition. Sometimes, it is a case of linguistic embarrassment, such as the translation of Pepsi’s Come Alive with the Pepsi Generation, which in Chinese translated into Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Dead.

Other times, it is a matter of cultural context, such as the use of the word *diet* in the Diet Coke brand name, which has either no relevance or an undesirable connotation in several countries and so necessitated the use of Coca-Cola Light as an alternate name. The challenge was to create a compelling branding system that would be consistently recognizable in 146 world markets, whether named Diet Coke or Coca-Cola Light. Coca-Cola positioned its product as a soft drink that would help people look and feel their best

rather than one solely centered around the notion of losing weight. In this way, they hoped, consumers would perceive these characteristics just by looking at the product’s graphics, regardless of the name it bore. The resulting combination of unique brand visual equities and clear expression of product attributes not only transcends name difference but can also be easily identified whether that name is rendered in English, Korean, Chinese, or Cyrillic characters.

As can be seen from the Diet Coke example, trade dress has to remain as consistent as possible in order to create a strong brand expression across all markets, particularly with the emergence of satellite television, the Internet, and an ever-increasing amount of air travel. Ultimately, if consumers cannot recognize “their” brands in advertising or on the shelf, they may decide to switch to competitive brands. In principle, brand identity and distinct positioning messages are best communicated across all countries through packaging graphics that are as standardized as

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reasonably possible. That said, changing the name slightly for different markets around the world is not as negative as one might think. People tend to recognize brands first by their signature color schemes and unique graphic elements and second by their names.

**Lesson 2: The quandary of country association**

Some global brands are strongly associated with their country of origin. Indeed, in certain categories this is part of the essence of the brand. Automobiles are the most obvious example. The German cultural psyche is embodied in Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, and BMW—and what is more Italian than a Ferrari? Other categories are

actually defined by their region of origin: Dom Perignon Champagne, Jack Daniels whiskey, and Jose Cuervo Tequila could not exist as such if they did not evoke specific areas within France, Tennessee, and Mexico. Still other famous

brands are deeply rooted in the folklore of their birthplace, such as Levi's California Gold Rush heritage or Harley-Davidson's association with American "outlaw" imagery—a symbol of freedom. The strength of these associations can be remarkably potent in the international marketplace.

It is up to companies either to emphasize these associations to their advantage or to recognize that their path to brand success is to be found by trying to embody the world's cultural differences into their brand. This has proved successful for companies like Yahoo, whose Web sites, derived from the American model, are country-specific. While always maintaining its slightly "on the edge" brand personality and never taking itself too seriously, Yahoo subtly modifies both content and communications for each of its 23 country-specific sites. Remaining consistent across all sites, and therefore linking each country to the brand, are color usage, typography, brandmark, and other graphic devices. Each country name is tightly linked to the brand by incorporating it into the logo-type. However, the sites appear in the local language (or dialect) of each country, and

content—from news to interest groups to banner advertising—is tailored accordingly.

**Lesson 3: Taking into regard cultural tastes and differences**

Beyond the product or service itself, the visual identity of the brand also faces problems of acceptance. A color or a design that achieves a positive result in one country may not have the same effect in another. Although the package or logo must portray the product's or company's values, attributes, personality, and positioning, it must also ensure that cultural tastes and differences are taken into account. In other words, a global brand must retain its autonomy while also adhering to local sensitivities.

Starbucks recently encountered loud protests when it signed a year's lease to operate a store within the Forbidden City, in Beijing, China. The coffee retailer boldly erected its trademark green-white-and-black sign, as it had done in hundreds of other locations around the world, and was immediately branded as a capitalist invader of this sacred place, despite the fact that there are many other non-Chinese shops and restaurants within the same walls. The cries to have Starbucks thrown out died down when the company adopted a more discreet signage program. Starbucks' mistake lay in not understanding that its proud display of brand could also be seen as a brash intrusion into a cultural shrine.

An example of a more positive approach in China relates to Pepsi, the number-one soft drink in China. Although its on-pack graphics, recognizable anywhere in the world, were not significantly altered for the Chinese market, the brand has been extremely successful in portraying a local image and establishing an emotional bond with Chinese consumers. One way this was achieved was by effectively using brand promotion specifically tailored for the Chinese audience. While Britney Spears for Pepsi and Christina Aguilera for Coke are fighting it out on the front lines of the "cola war" in the United States, Faye Wong, a very popular Chinese pop star, is persuasively endorsing Pepsi to her throngs of Chinese fans, making it "their" brand.

**Lesson 4: Physical packaging**

An often-overlooked, or at least underestimated, component of a brand's personality is the physical packaging itself. The distinctive shape of a

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package can become so recognizable that it often becomes the cornerstone of a brand's advertising, as exemplified by the long-running Absolut campaign that has successfully positioned its unique bottle profile as a central theme in print ads around the world. Shape equity is one of the more difficult assets to acquire, especially on a global basis, but once established it can be a powerful visual mnemonic. The trademark contour bottle created for Coca-Cola in 1915 to fend off copycat products has become so ubiquitous that a simple outline drawing of the bottle would be instantly recognized anywhere in the world.

That said, it would be wrong to think that a physical shape on its own would afford a product the global status of Coca-Cola and Absolut. Many years of cultivating consumer relationships and building their brand reputations have given them the stature they have today. For example, the little blue box that has become the global signature of Tiffany & Co is not solely used to communicate the company name but is also a way of symbolizing the quality and craftsmanship of its products.

#### **Lesson 5: Effects of environmental and social pressures**

Public pressure can heavily influence the types of products that are marketed and how they are made and packaged. Greenpeace is a particularly powerful social and political force internationally, influencing companies to actively pursue more environmentally friendly processes and procedures. More and more companies are designing and producing packaging and labels with nontoxic, soy-based inks; nonpolluting solvents; recycled and recyclable materials; redeemable glass, aluminum, and plastic containers; less material waste; and so on. This can present a challenge to the execution of a unified global brand strategy, since production and printing capabilities, as well as environmental consciousness, can vary considerably in different parts of the world.

Environmental issues do not just stop at packaging. Consumers are also becoming more aware of how their products are obtained, grown, and produced. Many of these issues will be responded to differently, often quite vehemently, in different regions around the globe. For example, whale products are sold in Japan as almost a matter of national pride, whereas in the

US, a can of tuna will not be purchased unless the package displays a seal assuring that dolphin-friendly fishing techniques were employed. A more recent hot topic has been the use of genetically modified organism (GMO) vegetable and grain crops; the use of GMO grain, whether intentional or inadvertent, in everything from corn chips to baby food has spurred massive product recalls. Once again, prominent on-pack assurance that a given product uses only non-GMO grain has become an important part of package communications in some categories. Indeed, many consumers now consider the brand behind the brand; it is no longer the product that has to consider environmental issues but also the entity as a whole. To their customers, employees, franchisees, stakeholders, and suppliers, The Body Shop is seen as more than a manufacturer of skin and hair care products—it is an entity committed to animal and environmental protection and to human rights. For example, its Web site discusses environmental and social issues, as well as marketing Body Shop products.

Social pressure can also have a serious impact on the graphic design or trade dress of a product. Even a best-selling brand with many years of built-up brand equity can now be deemed offensive. When the Colgate-Palmolive Company acquired a 50 percent share of Hong Kong's Hawley & Hazel Company in order to build production capacity in Asia, it soon found it had also acquired 100 percent of a controversy precipitated by one of Hawley & Hazel's brands—Darkie toothpaste. Although never considered racially offensive in Asian markets, where the name had little, if any, literal meaning, civil rights pressure in the United States quickly made it clear that Colgate-Palmolive's partial ownership of this brand in its current state would not be tolerated. The problem to be solved was compounded by the fact that the brand represented significant market share throughout Asia and that any changes to the brand's graphics had to

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maintain recognizable visual equities. Colgate-Palmolive set about removing this perceived example of racial stereotyping by adopting the name Darlie, with the same letter count and general appearance as the word Darkie. And instead of featuring a drawing of a black minstrel, the packaging now sports a portrait of a man of ambiguous race wearing a silk top-hat, tuxedo, and bowtie.

**Lesson 6: Different government legislation of consumer packaging from country to country**

Marketers will also find that governmental control in matters of package labeling can differ greatly from country to country. In the United States, for instance, much of the copy on package labels—in particular, product descriptions, net weight statements, and health or nutritional claims—is tightly regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The exact wording, and even the size and formatting of the type to be used for much of this information, is spelled out by the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act 1994 (NLEA). To complicate this situation

further, if the product contains meat, it has to adhere to additional on-pack requirements via the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Yet another set of rules applies if a product contains enough alcohol to

fall into the realm of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. And, of course, any regulation that dictates the way in which a great deal of the copy on a package must be displayed will necessitate the modification of any other text and images, if they are to fit on the package.

Other countries have package-copy guidelines that are either much more lenient or very different from those in the US, and this creates an obvious hurdle for consistent global communication. Although some degree of multinational uniformity is achieved because of commerce within the European Union or as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA), language differences are still very much a factor. Marketers hoping to do business in Canada have struggled for years to meet the English-French dual-language requirements, especially in Montréal and the eastern provinces. True multi-language packaging is even more complicated if a company attempts to satisfy all language and regulatory requirements within one universal package. This usually works more successfully with nonfood products that have fewer regulations to deal with in the first place.

Tax legislation can open a Pandora's box of a different sort, one that surprisingly can even affect the kind of graphics or visual images a product's package can display. In Argentina, for instance, tax laws are quite stringent in regard to reproduction of fine artwork on commercial packaging. If a company wants to use a well-known painting or illustration as part of its package, it must either alter the artwork enough to qualify it as "original," as Coca-Cola had to do when they used vintage Haddon Sundblom Santa illustrations on their Christmas packaging, or be prepared to pay a significant tax penalty.

**Lesson 7: Economies of scale**

One advantage of a unified global branding policy is the ability to achieve economies of scale in marketing and promotion expenses, savings that can ultimately be passed down to consumers. Development costs can be spread over the global offices, resulting in smaller markets having access to the otherwise unaffordable results of a much larger budget. Conversely, even in primary market areas, local marketing units sometimes may generate better, more on-target ideas than big-budget global efforts. Therefore a company has to make sure there is open communication and balance among all international participants (marketing, production, design, printing, advertising, promotion, and so forth) and that all points of view are listened to and respected early on in the process. The bigger and more well-known a brand is around the world, the more important it is to build a spirit of teamwork among all who will have a stake in protecting the long-term equity of the brand, while still allowing tactical local action to optimize short-term revenues. However, for a global brand to be cohesive, it is imperative that the central organizing unit does not lose strategic control by allowing local or regional factions to have too much

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autonomy. This is particularly true in regard to maintaining consistent expression of core brand attributes, the lack of which is usually the first visible indication that “brand anarchy” prevails. By vigilantly maintaining strong communication of a brand’s essence, localized versions of on-pack promotional campaigns can effectively target the demographics, psychographics, and sociographics of specific regional markets.

### **Conclusion**

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There is so much to contemplate when creating a design strategy for the global marketplace that the list of factors to consider sometimes seems unwieldy. The positives and negatives of creating one global design versus localized adaptations, or

remaining associated with the country of origin versus embodying cultural differences, must be weighed against each other. However, despite these complications, great brands tap into basic human needs and aspirations. There can be no stronger global brand platform than one that speaks directly to customers and improves their lives—no matter how small or incremental that improvement. ■ *Reprint # 01124ROE40*

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