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Research, Workflow, and Design Tools Versus Creativity

The proliferation of computer and web-based tools has been a productivity boon for package designers. Consumer goods companies are also expecting faster and faster turnarounds from idea conception to product launch. The combination of the two forces is affecting how designers approach their craft, and how consumer goods companies view design.

The question might be: Does this business environment produce more creative and more innovative package designs? Part of this question is a computer-age-old debate about using computer tools to aid creativity. As long as the tail is not wagging the dog, designers should be able to use any tool to help them achieve their vision. That can also be true of asset management software and consumer research techniques.

Package Design has brought together industry experts to ponder the sea change of expectations in this new climate. The discussion centers around three sets of tools—design tools that help designers get their ideas into 2D renderings and 3D prototypes quickly, workflow tools that help manage resources and improve productivity, and research tools that discover how consumers might react to designs.

Our diverse panelists responded objectively and candidly to key questions below. Though there are many perspectives represented, some insights were more consistent than others. Panelists had strong opinions about how successful package designs are a culmination of many forces, and pure creativity is only one. Most panelists agreed that consumer testing is very useful for learning what designs would not work, rather than pointing to designs that would work.

Our panel consists of:

- Peter Clarke**, president of Product Ventures
- Ronald de Vlam**, founding partner of Webb Scarlett deVlam's Chicago office
- Ed Moeller**, a principal of the Zunda Design Group
- Kent St. Vrain**, vice president of marketing and business development at Paxonix
- Mark Vanover**, director of marketing for Esko North America
- Robert Ziegler**, president of Brandimation LLC

Today's "tools of the trade" include an impressive array of computer and web-based asset management services, design aid and prototype development technologies, and consumer research techniques. Do these tools always aid creative and innovative package design?

St. Vrain: It's not the creative aspects of the process that these technologies address; it's the critical but mundane necessities. Automate the mundane and you leave more time for the creative part of the work at which good package designers excel.

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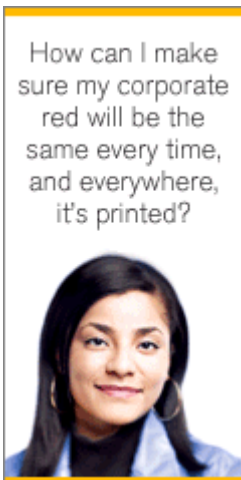
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Moeller: Designers should create in their mind and understand the needs of the client, then use the computer as an extension of their mind and hands. They need to be trained to listen to the needs of the client, understand the categories they are working in, know what is happening graphically in those categories, know what needs to be done, and know how far they can go.

de Vlam: We have a long history helping CPG companies build the value of their brands. This is not an art. This is a strategic alignment of external partners and their services achieving ambitious business goals. Web-based tools are exactly what they are—a tool to help client and external partner work together.

Ziegler: Brand companies sometimes have difficulty with long-term brand building, especially with brand manager turnover rates of two to three years. What can help with long-term branding is effective documentation of past efforts and current standards. Digital asset management and workflow systems can provide brand continuity tracking.

Vanover: These tools should be built to expedite the design process, and enable all stakeholders involved to efficiently communicate with one another, keep track of all assets, and share ideas in real time.

How do web-based design tools and consumer research help designers develop better packages?

de Vlam: The process of selecting suitable concepts and discarding ideas is not a computer function. It's a team process involving key team members that are vested in the long-term sustainability of the brand. The design process is about making mistakes and improving it as you go along. It is also a collaborative process of pleasing, modifying, and sometimes compromising the needs and expectations of the different stakeholders of the initiative.

Moeller: I have a lot of faith in the value of design research and speaking to consumers. However, many times research becomes a process of weeding out great ideas because they are not expected, the norm, or progressive. You can never test for packages' complete effectiveness. You can test to see if the design is communicating the promise of the brand to the consumer.

Vanover: With a large enough sample group, targeted by demographics, consumer testing can play a big role in the effectiveness of package design—or more importantly, what doesn't work from a package design perspective.

St. Vrain: What this kind of testing can do is help you discard the concepts that are not going to be productive. If you put five concepts up, two will surely fall out. It's not what's included, but what's discarded that is important. These technology research services do a fabulous job of helping brand owners focus on those ideas that will yield the best outcomes.

Clarke: On-line research tools are probably most useful for evaluating two-dimensional



To fully understand a package's impact, designers need to look at the "second moment of truth"—how consumers respond to a new design in their hand, says Peter Clarke.



Package design is not always an art, says Ronald de Vlam, but rather a compromise made to satisfy all stakeholders in the future of the brand.

branding elements like graphics—they are a cheap, fast way to collect lots of quantitative data. It's dangerous to use online research tools when evaluating the 3D embodiment of the brand, or structural package design. The package must be experienced by all the senses, not just visual—especially because much of the delight experienced by the consumer is in the functional aspects of the design.

Can designers develop unique and successful package designs that no research would recommend?

St. Vrain: Absolutely, because the creativity is in the mind of the package designer, not embedded in the technology. The technology is just a tool.

Ziegler: Absolutely. Visual pattern recognition is one thing. Visual quality recognition is another thing. Researchers are good at measuring what exists, but not at projecting what should exist. It takes experienced and talented designers and marketers to create and recognize visual quality and value.



Ed Moeller believes package design and brand design are business tools for CPG companies, and it's strategic thought and category understanding that take brands to new heights.

Moeller: Creative vision does not come from the computer. Creative vision comes from the brand designers' ability to distill the needs of the client, the needs of the category they are designing for, the printing process to be used, and how to visually create connections to the consumer that articulate at retail the promise of the brand to the consumer.

de Vlam: There is a plethora of testing models that can help detect brand and packaging effectiveness with consumers; however, in my opinion, all research should have a warning attached saying: "Please note, not all consumers are honest with their feedback."

How are fast time-to-market turnarounds affecting package design and creativity?

Ziegler: There's a trend in the cosmetics and personal care category where new equals better, sometimes every three months. This is a short-term differentiation solution and is a similar approach to what Burton did with snowboard designs in the late '90s—constant change became the brand definition. But long-term there's no substitute for a quality structural design, especially when it can be protected with design and utility patents.



There's no substitute for a quality structural design in long-term brand-building, especially when it can be protected with design and utility patents, says Robert Ziegler.

de Vlam: Investing in a creative design process is not always the right solution for a business need. Just because speed-to-market is a top priority doesn't mean that you have to circumnavigate a creative process. Quite often, a creative process can yield both short-term tactical gains and longer-term strategic directions, giving the brand a two- to four-year development plan beyond the immediate tactical solutions that might be needed for a short-term fix.

Clarke: In the end, the true test of structural package effectiveness is functionality performance that leads to repeat purchase—the Second Moment of Truth. This is probably best achieved with longitudinal qualitative studies of the same consumer testers over a period of time. How did the product perform at all stages of the life cycle:



on shelf, transport, storage, product dispense/delivery, open/close, product protection, and finally disposal.

Vanover: CPGs will always favor the creativity of a designer, who can listen to the ideas of the CPG and translate them into tangible, compelling form. As powerful as some web-based tools certainly are, there's still nothing that beats the innovation of the creative mind.

Moeller: I don't believe that great package design is an art form. Package design and brand design are business tools for CPG companies that are created with much strategic thought and category and product understanding. When done well, this creates targeted, visually inspiring brand designs that will create powerful relationships between a brand and its consumer, which creates long-term brand preference. I believe it takes someone with an artistic understanding and a creative intuition to be a great designer.



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