How to design for value brands

Supermarket own labels don’t need to be drab in look – learn from the minds at Cowan London on how they made discount chain Jack’s leap out from the shelves.

Think ‘value’ in a supermarket and you may be picturing the antithesis of creativity – monochrome packaging, a simple logo and perhaps the most humble of typefaces.

This wasn’t always the case, as anyone familiar with Peter Dixon’s wonderful 1960s label designs for Sainsbury’s will know (and which at the moment are rather interestingly being shared by the retail giant to the visual-hungry audience on Instagram).

The level of stylish simplicity shown by Dixon though has arguably not extended to the 21st century when it comes to value brand lines or even the packaging in discount retailers like Lidl. What happens then if an own label brand is writ large and becomes a store of its own?

New supermarket chain Jack’s answers that question, a discount brand from Tesco with a handful of stores across England and counting. Each product in the store comes at value prices with design from the team at Cowan London, who answered the brief of creating a packaging design strategy that would set the young brand apart from other retailers.

Cowan designed the packaging for over 700 stock keeping units (or SKU), which is a number assigned by retailers to a product so as to identify the price, product options and manufacturer of the merchandise.

The team at Cowan created all the design assets for Jack’s including typography, front and back of package labels, colour

palettes, imagery and illustrations for each range.

A wealth of design creativity then that would keep any designer and studio stacked to the brim with work – and one which requires an understanding of both consumer and product.

The first step by Cowan was to let go of the Tesco heritage and start from a blank canvas.

“Although part of the Tesco family, Jack’s is a new and different retail offer, so we approached the project with a brand creation mindset,” says Elizabeth Finn, managing director at Cowan. “The brand team wanted Jack’s to look and feel very different to Tesco.

“(As such) it was a huge, complex task that went at great speed. From design strategy to the first store opening took just under a year.”

The Jack’s case study is a fascinating one as, on one side of the aisle, it features a strong brand identity featuring the use of illustrations inspired by the Britain of yesteryear; on the other, with some products can be seen the simplicity accustomed to with value branding (no thrills or illustrations, as below) but with the constant presence of the Jack’s logo, itself keepsake of the British heritage motif.

Designed to look like a chalk scrawling, Elizabeth explains the logo is a throwback to price signs seen down the local butchers or fishmonger.

“We chose an eclectic approach to the packaging design, unique in supermarket retail, that would bring to life the feel of a traditional market stall,” she says.

“Each category has its own unique design, with the flexibility to tap into category codes and communicate Britishness in a variety of ways. Very different styles provide variety, pace and personality on shelf, anchored in quality and value.

“It was important to communicate the quality codes that customers are looking for in different categories: efficacy in

washing powder, for example; authenticity and taste in ready meals, and freshness in produce. This meant there was a lot of flex in the design of different ranges.”

Designing for value brands then doesn’t need to have creatives tied down to one look – but a certain level of gravity is needed.

‘We applied design principles instead of strict guidelines to ensure all designs were right for the brand. The Jack’s logo is the one constant that proudly holds everything together,” Elizabeth continues.

The name *Jack's* itself refers to the one trace of Tesco that can be found in the enterprise's DNA, chain founder Jack Cohen, who started his business on a market stall in East London after the end of WW1.

The decision denotes an appreciation of local market commerce, and with the majority of Jack's products grown, reared or made in Britain, the store has good claim in supporting Britain's food producing communities. This is the brand identity, carried across in one modest-looking logo.

"Jack's has a no fuss approach with a simplified range of products," Elizabeth says, drawing store look and store ethos together. "No fancy fixtures or fittings, and no added extras."

Luckily the same philosophy hasn’t been applied to Jack’s design and marketing, meaning the sky’s the limit when it comes to own label branding.

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