The 7 branding mistakes made by start-ups

Branding matters to start-ups. As any successful entrepreneur will tell you, a great product combined with effective manufacturing, distribution and sales will get you from idea to start-up business, but if you want to scale beyond there you need a brand that people notice, choose and recommend.

It’s hard to get right. The best ones seem effortless – obvious even – but they never are. It takes time, expertise and investment. So, when someone hits on a formula it’s understandably tempting for others to follow it. Why bother with all that work and expense when the recipe for success is already out there waiting to be used?

So, it’s been little surprise to see the slew of start-up brands, all aimed at millennials, and all adopting a very similar look and feel. From to Naked, Oppo to Qwrkee, and Bol to Nom, it’s all been name-led and simple imagery with striking dominant colours. Remarkably effective in many cases; a little dull in others.

The backlash against this blanding has already begun, and start-ups are looking for fresh approaches to create brands with stand out and cut through. But blanding is not the only mis-step start-ups can make with brand creation. Over the years we’ve seen many, and here we share seven of the most common.

1. The overly familiar

Back in the day when a carton of juice was a carton of juice

and labels told you ingredients and use by date, Innocent introduced drinks that wanted to be your friend, and labels that chirpily told you about its healthy, wholesome ingredients.

It was a runaway success, taking a huge chunk out of Tropicana's market share, and now today's supermarkets are filled with products that want to make friends with consumers just like Innocent did.

With their unthreatening, quirky names, their lower-case typography, childlike colour palettes and imagery, and second person, chatty copy, these brands sometimes build the rapport they're seeking, but increasingly they alienate an ever more sceptical public.

Some brands are inherently friendly. Their visual and verbal identity should deliver this. Many, though, just feel inauthentic, and would benefit from a different approach.

2. The copycats

The Innocent story points to a second mistake: simply mimicking someone else's success. It can work for the first one or two in the market, but after that it just starts to look derivative. How can we tell and Naked apart?

Each brand has its own story to tell. They should tell that story, and be themselves – as the famous, often misattributed, saying goes: "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken."

3. The overly descriptive

Descriptions are good. They engage emotions and help people connect to you products. But evoke the experience rather than the ingredients. It's clear what is, and the name will appeal to its core audience. But contrast it with Ripple, another plant-based milk, but one that has a name and brand platform

designed to reach a far broader audience.

4. The generic organic

The market for organic products continues to grow. How do you mark your product out as organic? Use a naïve design style, an earthy colour palette and a typeface that looks handwritten.

It might convey your organic credentials, but it does nothing to set you apart from the four hundred other products in the shopper’s field of vision all of which carry the same design code.

Now compare that look and feel to . That organic snack brand managed to convey its organic credentials but also to stand out. Launched in 2016, by the end of 2018 it was stocked in more than 40,000 places worldwide, had secured an $8m round of funding, and was moving into profitability.

5. The passing fad

looks good now. Its washed-out greys are welcome respite from the avalanche of earthy browns in that part of the supermarket. And a revenue hike from $1.5m in 2017 to $15m in 2018 is certainly impressive. But how will those washed-out colours look five years from now? Oat milk is here to stay, but the Oatly visual identity is so distinctively of the moment that once this moment has passed it will need to evolve to remain relevant and noticed.

The same is true of . It’s bold, it’s punchy, but once you’ve seen it, you’ve seen it and it will need to find clever, creative ways to keep its audience interested.

Too many start-ups allow themselves to be led by designers creating what they think is in fashion now. They should instead focus on what is true to the brand.

6. The anti-marketer

This is fairly recent, and has tended to play more across advertising with brands like Brewdog running ads that tell us somewhat paradoxically not to believe the advertising, or Oasis with its honest campaign – “It’s summer. You’re thirsty. We’ve got sales targets.”

We’re seeing it increasingly in brand design uses a completely pared-back, typically black-and -hite look and feel to imply that this is not a brand, it’s a product. It’s a successful tactic right now, but in the longer term these firms will have far greater success by embracing the potential of design to influence behaviour and drive start-up success.

7. The short term thinker

is a brilliantly clever loo roll brand. It’s striking, ethical, and funny. It appeals strongly to a clearly defined part of the twentysomething market. But has it thought through the future growth of the business? Does the joke play so well when the twentysomethings now have small children also using the family loo?

We see this short termism happening with lots of the direct to consumer brands designed for Instagram. It looks good there, gets sales and a following, but what happens when that leads to a listing in a major multiple?

There are many examples of start-ups making the leap and thriving there, but in many cases it’s luck rather than judgement. That future should be considered and planned for in the initial brand creation phase, not left to chance.

In search of timeless beauty

So, those are the mistakes to avoid. How do brands go about

getting this right?

Understand your audience, delve deep to understand what it is that matters to them about your product, and then find fresh, distinctive ways of communicating it to them. Ensure your solution stretches across channels and will flex for future range extensions. Be similar enough not to scare people off, but distinctive enough to get noticed.

In short, stick to the fundamental principles of brand creation. Above all else, don’t look for short cuts. Successful brand creation takes time, expertise and investment.

Elizabeth Finn is managing director at , an independent design agency.

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