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What's Ahead for Brand Creative

By Kenneth Hirst

As designers we need more than ever to be astute students of the social and technological forces that are reshaping our world and accelerating change at a breathtaking pace. While change is all around us, a handful of trends promise to have a major impact on how we approach our craft in the coming years if we hope to fulfill consumers' ever-rising expectations. Let's take a brief tour of some of the forces at work.

Customization and personalization: brand your brand

More than ever consumers want to participate in the creative process and crave the ability to add their own personal touches to products in the attempt to create a personal brand statement. Concoct-it-yourself perfumeries, snap-it-on cell-phone faceplates, and other do-it-yourself design opportunities represent just the beginning of a powerful force arising from brands that value engaging consumers.

Personalized and customizable products forge an even closer bond among the consumer, the product, the brand, and the company. Yet while [Nike](#) offers the chance to design your own sneakers and [Xbox](#) has snap-on faceplates, the challenge will only grow for brands to maintain, and strengthen, their core brand image.

The evolution of personalized products highlights the need for brands to sustain strong identities through solidified positioning, strategic packaging innovations, and effective graphic design, which remain distinctive in the face of evolving customizable product characteristics.

Hand-in-hand brands

Focused brands that represent cool and quality are gaining greater exposure by enriching wider-ranging brands. The growing use of dual marketing ploys, brand acquisitions, and strategic partnerships brings targeted consumer groups into tight focus. For example, staying at a Westin Hotel one expects the beauty products in the bathroom to be premium, all-natural Aveda brand. Sister hotel chain Le Meridien enhances its appeal with top-of-the-line Hermès toiletries, 500-count cotton linens, and expensive mattresses. Nike and Apple partnered to bring the worlds of sports and music together with the launch of innovative [Nike + iPod](#) products.

Lamborghinis are being sold with [Versace-finished interiors](#).

By partnering, brands increase the quality perception, capitalize on existing brand recognition and loyalty, and renew and refresh consumer interest. Nevertheless, it is important that the individual brands' originality and innovation efforts continue at the same time. Maintaining a core identity is key, especially when interlocking with another brand in a partnership.

Seeing green

All-natural product lines, especially cosmetics, skincare, and haircare, are on the upswing, stressing holistic lifestyles and environmental awareness. Spas proliferate, increasingly using products with all-natural ingredients, many of which are homemade, such as masks made with bananas, milk, honey, and rosewater. [Lush](#), a U.K.-based cosmetics company, specializes in handmade products of fresh organic fruit and vegetables, essential oils, and safe synthetics without animal ingredients.

[Origins](#), [Dr. Hauschka Skin Care](#), and [Aveda](#) stress the relationship between Mother Nature and human nature, promoting beauty and wellness by conducting business in a way that does not compromise the sustainability of future generations. Even [Wal-Mart](#) has launched an aggressive program to encourage its 60,000 suppliers to produce environment friendly goods and use organic raw materials while educating consumers to buy green.

The packaging of these products stresses sustainability; protecting the earth and conserving resources by using earth-friendly materials such as bioplastics, [bagasse](#), [TerraSkin](#), bamboo, and recycled paper and plastics. But with so many brands capitalizing on the "green" movement, product packaging has become mundane. Companies need to look for new ways to differentiate their vision that competitors can't easily match. Expect to see the introduction of innovative packaging that emphasizes greenness and sustainability while complementing differentiating brand values.

Urban to urbane

Ostentatious products, such as "bling" jewelry and Swarovski-crystal-encrusted phones and PDAs, will take a backseat to more sophisticated, refined pieces by the end of the decade. Subtle, chic, and classic design esthetics are already replacing "look at me" designs covered with big logos and flashy embellishments. Less is more as restraint and refinement define all that is stylish and chic. Today's consumers are beginning to recognize products by their design and quality, not by an emblazoned brand mark.

Forever young

Fifty is the new 30, 60 the new 40. Our culture has a massive demand for effective, affordable noninvasive alternatives to cosmetic surgery. Premium skincare marketers such as L'Oreal and Estee Lauder have adopted technologies from pharmaceuticals and electronics to introduce antiaging actives to the skin more effectively, more efficiently, and for a longer duration. Mass-

market brands such as Olay and Neutrogena have launched similar products to compete with professional skincare brands but at lower price points and with larger distribution.

Other innovations include full-scale beauty regimes that combine yoga or meditation in the recognition that beauty is more than skin deep. Ingestible nutritional supplement lines, designed to care for skin from the inside out, are becoming more visible.

With so many antiaging potions and lotions on the market, inventive products are popping up in the category from niche brands, such as [LipFusion's](#) lip-plumping glosses and [DuWop's](#) Reverse Eyeliner, a multitasking pencil that diminishes the signs of aging by plumping fine lines around the eyes. Skin brighteners, firming agents such as [Benefit's](#) Wonderbod Jiggle Gel, and cellulite reducers are other products making debut appearances in many cosmetic lines. Expect to see even more advances in skincare coupled with innovative dispensing systems and premium package treatments.

The emerging 21st century is full of promise, and threat, which poses many new opportunities disguised in challenges for designers who understand the cultural currents and can successfully ride the wave of change. If we hope to succeed, we must open our hearts and minds to the new, central role of consumers and their growing desire for control over every aspect of their lifestyles. Our task is no longer simply to prettify things but to design real value and efficacy into products while enhancing the overall aesthetic.


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