

The Total Package: Bringing Design to the Town Square

Words: Crai S. Bower

Girvin should know. As a principal founder at GIRVIN Inc., with offices in Seattle, New York, Paris and Tokyo, the peripatetic designer looks for visual patterns wherever he travels. The images he finds might include a minaret eclipsing sunrise or a marketplace basket shot from an unusual angle. The thread: impressions intended to engender conversation.

Turning away from the bazaar and toward contemporary retail, Girvin reflects on the dominant trend he sees today. "The goal [of retail design] today is to accelerate a relationship, hold the relationship, advance the proposition and then extend the advancement of the relationship."

The experience of consuming should run parallel to the consuming experience. The Apple Store provides a paragon example. We begin thinking Apple from the moment we spy the solitary Mac icon, isolated against the background.

"We design specifically to make the customer part of the relationship," Girvin explains.

"Retailers greet you at the door, create private events that reinforce the membership boundaries and strengthen the consumer's tie to the store. Then we invite you back like an old friend."

"As a designer," says Philippe Becker, principal co-founder of Philippe Becker Design, "you want to create exclusive experiences that cannot be duplicated. The package design must convey that message and create the brand's halo, or desire, for the consumer."



All images courtesy of Becker Design



Becker cites client Williams-Sonoma as a perfect example. "We constantly work with Williams-Sonoma to redesign very successful lines at the premium level," the San Francisco designer explains. "Because every box store now offers a 'premium' or 'private' label. To be successful, Williams-Sonoma must remain a unique brand that creates desire in its customers. The only way to sell margarita mix at a higher price is if that mix coming from Williams-Sonoma means more to the consumer than if the same ingredients came from a grocery store."

Williams-Sonoma's success selling Sonoma Blue stoneware and Belgian Waffle mix attests to its gilded halo. But this halo can quickly transform into a yoke, even a noose. When Whole Foods first introduced its 365 Organic brand, customers balked. "Aren't all Whole Foods 365 products organic?" they questioned. Whole Foods' wildly successful generic store brand's halo may have been too holy.

"Design is basically a visual personality, a book that asks you to judge it by its cover," Maureen Erbe, founding principal of Erbe Design in Los Angeles, says. "We are the visicians who try to get into the head of the client to find out who the client is and who they are trying to attract,"

And not all designs are going to attract all consumers, a reality that Erbe says is often lost on young companies and designers.

"We need to attract a new consumer's attention in a nanosecond, either by appealing to them or repelling them." Erbe continues. "We want the response. This compels us to take something staid like the Speedo brand and make it bright and fun; to get the customer to think differently about it.

Erbe describes the Monrovia plant and pot design as an example of her challenging and proudest projects. A high-end plant provider, Monrovia plants sat indistinguishable from the other flora when the designer visited a commercial nursery.

She says: "The nursery industry was completely void of branding, just a long queue of shrubs and trees in green pots. But Monrovia actually had a story to tell. They really were a premium, quality plant company, which is why they also cost more. So we created a simple band for the pot, informed the consumer about the growing techniques, taught them why the plants were better. Now when you enter the nursery and see the 'branded, banded pot' from across the space, you know it's a Monrovia pot."