

## DISCIPLINES

# WATER WORLD

When consumers buy bottled water, what they're really paying for is image. See how design has pushed the popularity of the world's oldest resource through the roof.

BY JASON TSELENTIS

"This is the new oil," said comedian Robin Williams, referring to the bottled water he was sloshing down during his 2002 Broadway performance. And his comedic observation is as true today as it was then.

According to Tom Standage, who wrote a historical and cultural account of everything from beer to Coca-Cola in "A History of the World in Six Glasses," the beverage industry will continue to capitalize on bottled water, placing more emphasis on the clear liquid instead of their sugary soft drinks and juices. Hydrogen and oxygen molecules have been a full-fledged commodity for decades, bringing in millions of dollars in revenue annually.

And it's not just soft drink companies like Coca-Cola (maker of Dasani) and Pepsi (maker of Aquafina) that are benefitting from the boon: Regional and boutique brands have begun to soak up the profits by producing bottled versions of flat, flavored, enriched or carbonated H<sub>2</sub>O.

According to the Beverage Marketing Corp., U.S. residents drink more bottled water annually than any other beverage except carbonated soft drinks. Per capita consumption of bottled water has been growing by at least one gallon per person annually—more than doubling in a decade.

Not surprisingly, this escalation has turned into a gusher for graphic designers, who hope to develop new business avenues while also demonstrating the value of design.

## OPPORTUNITY COSTS

Like the water from any sink or drinking fountain, bottled water has been made safe for human consumption through purification. Utility companies process spring, well, sea or municipal water with specific methods like distillation boiling and re-condensing the water. The end result is non-carbonated water that gets bottled up, imprinted and adorned with sophisticated design, zingy taglines and, sometimes, celebrity endorsements.

Through brand extensions like flavoring or enrichment, the help of deft design, viral marketing campaigns and innovative products, consumers are buying more than just water—or so they think.

Marty Neumeier illustrated this notion in his 2003 book "The Brand Gap" by explaining how a successful brand caters to consumers' emotions and desires: Water from the tap can be seen as X; it's easy to come by and costs little. The No. 1 domestic brand, Aquafina, includes typographic modifiers like *pure* and *perfect* and consumers trust it as a Pepsi product, making it X multiplied by X (or X<sup>2</sup>). Moving up the quality and aesthetic ladder we have Fiji, tasting as pure as a waterfall because it's been "Untouched by Man" during the bottling process (although it has been touched by Tom Cruise and Madonna), yielding X<sup>3</sup>. If we continue this vertical climb toward the lofty heights of T'y Nant or Oxygen waters, we would reach even more distinguished products that earn an X<sup>4</sup> value because their radical appearance differs from what sits in supermarket aisles and gas station coolers. Value, aesthetic and, in the case of Fiji, tribe, all contribute to which bottled beverage you'll sink your money into and drink up.

## ADDED VALUE

When author Anthony Burgess portrayed the "Clockwork Orange" antiheroes mingling in milk bars, he forecasted something that we may see very soon, although with a different beverage: water bars, where teens down the purest of liquids. But what will the containers look like in our future? Should they serve as windows? Should they be adorned by famous designers, in the fashion of Coca-Cola's limited-edition aluminum bottles with etched graphics and fluorescent imagery? Or should they blend into the beverage landscape and mimic the size and shape of their competition—soft drinks?

There was a time when both Evian and Perrier dominated the bottled water landscape with little distracting us from their pink and green identities, but look down the beverage aisles these days and you'll witness a sea of names, logos and colors on the shelves. Smart Water, Trump Ice, Propel, Athena, Iceland Spring, Pocari Sweat and Super H<sub>2</sub>O hit consumers like a tidal wave with their elaborate packages containing the transparent liquid.

In fact, anybody can make their own bottled water by using Grand Rapids, MI, company Northern Falls to create custom labels that are applied to bottles that hold from 8 ounces to 2.5 gallons.

The cosmetic industry looks to ride the wave too, with department store makeup counters selling Borba Skin Water that promises to nurture your derma through a combination of vitamins and minerals—in effect, giving you healthy skin from the inside out.

But when we're thirsty, do the contents matter? The bottles lure consumers with their visual and verbal veneer, enticing them to pay up to 10,000 times the price of tap water. Who cares how much it costs? When we gulp it down, looking at the bottle's angular or bulbous design, it's hard not to feel a sense of indulgence as keywords like *fresh, enhanced, fluid, springs, crystal, vitamins* or *minerals* cater to our sense of well-being. Coupling this language with sensual colors, Photoshop-generated moisture or a heavenly landscape furthers our belief in a product that we'll find in plenty of mass-market venues: grocery stores, gas stations, discount chains and school cafeteria vending machines. And these days, it's hard to tell if that blue vending machine contains Pepsi Cola or Aquafina water—it could even be Dasani from rival Coca-Cola.

## HEALTHY COMPETITION

Building on their already diverse client list, Seattle's Turnstyle Studios has shifted attention to the food and beverage landscape. Most recently, the firm developed an identity and packaging system for DRY Soda. Having researched beverages heavily, principal Steve Wilson sees a problem with how similar the bottled water landscape appears. "It's hard to avoid blues, greens and purples ... but it might be wise to avoid heavy, garish blue-teal, blue-purple gradients," he says. "Why avoid all these things? Because they are, at worst, over-used and, at best, already being done. Who knows: Maybe a color other than blue could really set you apart?" Blue spells cool and cold—the very relief one looks for after sweating out the hot summer months—but it wouldn't hurt to try something different.

Standing out from the herd doesn't seem like a priority for beverage companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi, both of which employ blue in the identity and packaging of their waters. Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Dannon own a majority of the bottled water mass market where consumers instinctively flock toward a preferred brand. But with the market overloaded by similar colors and forms, new challengers have grown cautious of trendy appearances and look to create distinctive images using design. You don't need a trip to the gourmet grocer to see something sophisticated or, at the very least, different from the sea of cool colors and ice-capped mountains. Following are some design standouts:

**Glacéau Vitaminwater.** Glacéau's Vitaminwater took a fresh approach when its founder J. Darius Bikoff launched the company in 1996—a time when the "less is more" aesthetic was anything but acceptable in a market dominated by streams and mountains. But Vitaminwater turns heads, and Turnstyle's Wilson underscores why this model works. "Nowhere is there a more appropriate place to take a less-is-more approach, both in packaging and graphics," he says. "Packaging solutions ought to trust in consumers' rising sophistication and design acumen and their ability to comprehend design at higher levels. It would be great to see a reexamination of bottled-water package design at the mass-consumer level. Certainly, there is room for design that is better-crafted, that is fresh and innovative, while still fostering mass appeal and communicating a lower price point."

On supermarket shelves, Vitaminwater's almost clinical white space helps the bottle snap to the foreground—amidst a cool-colored, yet noisy backdrop—and its black Helvetica Neue logotype gives one the impression that the bottles could sit behind a pharmacy counter. The flavored water's coloring gets your attention among a collection of clear fluids, proving that Glacéau's counterintuitive approach triggers consumer curiosity.

**Voss.** In contrast to Vitaminwater's modernist veneer, Voss water—contained in a perfectly cylindrical and statuesque glass bottle—looks like the one thing that people want when they take the healthy route: a slender waistline. As crazy as it sounds, you'll observe people swigging down the expensive beverage (as much as \$5 for 27 ounces) at premier health clubs even though gripping the slick glass proves difficult with sweaty hands.

Tim Girvin, principal of Seattle-based Tim Girvin Design Group, has consulted with food and beverage giants like the Coca-Cola Co. In 2003, his studio developed an identity and marketing system to position Athena in the already crowded marketplace. Girvin says bottles are the next creative frontier because unique forms will grab consumers' attention much more quickly when combined with memorable identity design. But who wants to carry around a glass bottle in their purse or tote bag? Many advances in polyethylene terephthalate (PET) have allowed for new forms using a material that's lightweight, nearly unbreakable and incredibly malleable.

**T'y Nant.** T'y Nant hired London-based designer Ross Lovegrove to add fluidity to its still-water packaging in 2001, and he used PET bottling technologies to generate the flowing shape. The redesigned 2001 bottle mimics the motion of water so successfully that it not only won the Bottled Water World Best Overall Design in 2002, but it also compelled the judges to create a new category called the Premier Award. T'y Nant's deft bottle comes with functional bonuses: Its shape is easier to hold than most symmetrical bottles because of the cavities

you can sink your fingers into, and it can be easily crushed for recycling.

**OGO.** Following in the footsteps of T'ny Nant, Netherlands-based OGO hired famous Parisian design firm Ora-Ito to lend panache to its oxygen-enriched product. On the company's website, the spherical bottle floats across the screen, creating an effervescent atmosphere that alludes to the product's enriched properties. Both T'ny Nant and OGO are based in Europe, a continent that has more history in the packaging and distribution of bottled water than America. But stateside, new companies look poised to raise the bar by leveraging aesthetics and utility to entice consumers in a design-savvy marketplace. Both Fiji and Sei (pronounced "say") use a rectangular-shaped bottle to maximize the product within shelf space.

**Sei.** Sei's bottle fits nicely into a purse or even a coat pocket—just like a flask—but alcoholic metaphors miss the boat entirely. During their preliminary research, Sei's team of marketers recognized that water canteens used by armed forces are both simple and sturdy. Numerous manufacturing innovations led to the bottle's current design, with its incomparable rigidity. (Sei claims the bottles are 40% to 50% stronger than their competition.)

The packaging showcases the very thing you want in bottled water—the water itself—by using a container devoid of labels and colors and, in effect, acting as a window rather than a canvas for graphics. The company touts the product as "industrial and natural, cutting-edge and timeless," making it sound like it belongs in the Museum of Modern Art.

Clearly, the Sei design commands attention and, upon closer inspection, consumers will notice Sei's Helvetica Neue logotype quietly debossed with nothing else obscuring the contents. It's easy to feel a state of relaxation looking directly through Sei's bottle. But Jennifer Kinon, a designer at Pentagram's New York City office, finds transparent packages problematic. "Making yourself invisible is a tough way to dominate shelf space," says Kinon, who conducted her School of Visual Arts MFA thesis on how water could be sold at bars and displayed alongside alcohol.

**Fiji.** In contrast to Sei's invisible cloak, Fiji's graphics utilize nearly every color in the spectrum and create a trompe l'oeil effect. Fiji, whose print ads read like poetry thanks to modifiers such as *pure*, *virgin*, *comfort*, *essential* and *safe*, has become vogue; celebrities like Jennifer Aniston, Ben Affleck and Drew Barrymore have been spotted with the product in hand. To a twentysomething shopper at Dean & DeLuca, Fiji is the water of celebrities, and Fiji's website previously reinforced this notion with a tabloid-like "Sightings" section, where a variety of stars and starlets were spotted cradling their Fijis. If you admire any of these water-swiggling personalities, chances are you'll buy Fiji because of this celebrity factor—making you feel like part of their tribe.

## BRAND APPEAL

When it comes to taking care of our bodies, choosing water makes sense from a health perspective; but choosing which water to drink isn't as easy as selecting between Coke or Pepsi. With so many bottled waters on the market, anybody has a chance of earning a profit from packaging and peddling the product. But turning bottled water into a successful business venture isn't as easy as pouring the liquid into a container and selling it at your local Wal-Mart.

Many regional and independent brands take the plunge, only to fizz out when they can't compete with the big brands. When given the choice between the vanilla packaging of something called "Fred's Water" or the colorful and evocative design of Fiji, you'll probably choose Fiji. You know the name, are attracted to its colorful identity, trust the product, appreciate its emotional value and hope for some functional reward. After you indulge yourself with that last drop of Fiji, sit back and relax, because you've bought more than H<sub>2</sub>O—clearly, you've bought into a brand.

---

Jason Tselentis is a Charlotte, NC-based writer and designer. [jason@morsa.com](mailto:jason@morsa.com)