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Packaging: Designing the Interface Between Customers, Products, and Brands

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The core creative concept in branding: A streamlined approach

by Kim Zarney

Effective packaging depends on many players, elements, and decisions that change from project to project. Kim Zarney offers a tested recipe for getting the most from these ingredients, a process that stresses the development of a “core creative concept.” A case study illustrates his approach and demonstrates how success emerges from carefully sizing up opportunities and constraints coupled with thoughtful analysis and planning.



Kim Zarney, President and Creative Director, Zarney Creative

Anyone who enjoys stir-fry cooking knows the key to a delicious meal is having all your ingredients ready before you get started. Stir-frying is a rapid process, and it works best when you add each ingredient at just the right time. It's a fun and easy way to cook—if you're prepared.

Implementing a successful packaging program in today's business environment is a lot like stir-fry cooking. There's a sense of urgency: Everything is a priority, it seems, and it all has to be done at the same time. As designers, our responsibility to help clients achieve bottom-line results is constantly challenged by limited budgets, inflexible retail merchandising requirements, tight production schedules, and shrinking delivery timelines. The pressure is on to make sure

packaging solutions will work. At the same time, with more product choices and increasing quantities of visual clutter all competing for the consumer's attention, it's more important than ever to simplify branding messages.

The best way to achieve all these goals is to have a core creative concept to drive all the branding elements needed for a launch. Think of it as a recipe for fast-tracking the entire process. In order to establish a clear, simple message in the minds of consumers, we first need a clear understanding of what this concept needs to communicate. The more specific the message, the more effective it can be in generating the results we want.

Print advertising has always understood how this creative formula works. The timeless appeal of a great ad is its

ability to tell a story, without the need for a lot of extra words or explanation. The visual impact pulls us in, and the intellectual delight keeps us there. Even though packaging is physically more complex than the printed page, the opportunity is still there to tell a simple story and make an emotional connection with the target audience.

The ingredients

To create that special meal, you need to find the right recipe—one that outlines all the ingredients, instructions, and special techniques you're going to need. The same rationale is true for developing a core creative concept to help guide your new packaging program. The process starts with a review of your design and marketing brief to determine what you actually have to work with. It's the only place that lists all the key ingredients of the "what" of your message; analyzing those ingredients and combining them with your own marketplace observations will eventually help determine the "how." The end result of this front-end review and analysis should be a written brief that links the creative objectives with the business objectives. It will serve as a benchmark to test your concept as you move through the process.

The benefits of putting your brief in writing rather than "just talking it through" will become abundantly clear once your program gets under way. Everyone needs to be in sync and have the same information as things heat up. Remember, it's all about speed. Getting products to market faster, connecting with consumers quicker, and moving off the shelf faster gets the bottom-line results everyone wants.

The inflexible elements

Building a core creative concept should always start with a review of all the inflexible elements—the parameters within which you must work. First on the list is finding out how much time you have; that way, you'll know how much "wiggle room" you have to explore alternative solutions. For instance, your product launch may require multiple packaging formats, which will mean multiple vendor sources—and vendor deadlines usually aren't coordinated to maximize your time or your program's budget.

The next inflexible issues to be studied are production and retail merchandising requirements. This is where design plans and reality

often collide, and usually it happens at a point in the process when it's going to cost someone a lot of time and money to make the necessary changes. With retailers calling the shots today on how their floor and shelf space will be used, you need to know ahead of time what physical or production constraints are going to be imposed on the program.

Moreover, because retail packaging and merchandising systems change frequently, you need to keep asking a lot of questions to make sure you have the latest information. Try to take advantage of these constraints rather than just deal with them. They may even provide you with an opportunity to reconfigure your offering or sell more of your line as sets or kits.

Once deadlines and technical issues have been determined, it's time to see what financial resources are available. While creativity doesn't necessarily depend on having a large budget, it *does* depend on knowing what the budget is—*before* the process actually gets started. Trying to jump-start design before the budget is determined rarely saves time and usually leads to false expectations. A big part of the planning process is creatively working with the budget to accomplish what you're being asked to do. In finalizing budgets, it's also important to make sure concept development and all the main creative elements (photography, illustration, copy, and so forth) have their own line-item budget amounts. It's the only way to guarantee you'll have the dollars available to implement the creative strategies you've promised.

While the inflexible issues aren't usually thought of as the place to start the creative process, having them well documented before moving on to the more-subjective issues is time well spent. They are the informational foundation on which you'll base the rest of your thinking.

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Reviewing opportunities

Next on the list is a review of the creative opportunities found in the heart of the design and marketing brief. In the haste to get new products launched, it's surprising how many times critical business and marketing issues are still in flux long after the design process has been started. Design shouldn't be used as a tool to try to resolve these conflicts. Before you move forward with any concept development, everyone has to

agree on the answers to the big questions: Why are we launching this brand? What results do we want to achieve? The core creative concept needs to reflect and support these primary business objectives.

You also need to have a clear understanding of who you're selling the product to. Even though most products today are created for a mass-market retail environment, your concept needs to resonate with the individual personalities who make up your target audience. Is the new packaging speaking their language? Design can put a face on those markets by finding out more about

them. Are they decision makers who decide what to buy, influencers who offer complementary products, or users/recommenders who already know your brand and are satisfied customers? Each of these specialized audiences has its own unique point of view on "what's important" when it comes to your product and packaging. What are their demographics? What needs or desires will the new product or brand satisfy? Answers to these questions will help the design team simplify the message and make the right connections. In addition, it's important to consider how consumers are supposed to interact with your packaging and product

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information after they leave the store. Some of the best value-added branding opportunities can happen in this post-sale environment.

Post-sale is also where the Internet can play an important role. Consumers should be able to easily access additional product information or detailed "how-to" instructions, in multiple languages, online. Creative use of this new medium will build brand loyalty by providing real value-added benefits for the consumer. It also gives your brand the tools it needs to be more competitive on the shelf. Packaging that clearly communicates the availability of additional information online has a selling advantage over brands that don't. The trick is to make sure that experience is a good one. Packaging that clearly communicates the availability of additional information online gives its brand a selling advantage. The trick is to make sure that experience is a good one. Don't make the consumer click through a myriad of pages to try to find what you promised—make it easy. Ideally, it should be a link right off the home page or a separate Web site devoted to your specific product offering.

Assess the competition

Unless your product line is a completely new category, the creative review should finish with an assessment of the competitive environment. While some of the competitive issues may have been answered in the business and marketing plans, design needs to test the water with its own observations and insights of how the competition is doing. What's working for them? What isn't? Are there opportunities for this new packaging to be more effective? How do you want the brand to be perceived? What messages do you want the packaging to convey? What messages do you want to avoid? What visual "tone of voice" do you want to project? Answers to these and other competitive questions will give design the opinions, observations, and concepts needed to visualize the core creative concept and, ultimately, the new visual brand positioning.

The goal is to differentiate your brand in the eyes of the consumer. We know consumers connect with brands that match their own wants and needs. We also know packaging is often the only expression of a brand the consumer sees or interacts with. That first impression has to be a good one, and your brand positioning needs to

be immediately understood. If you've done your homework, your core creative concept will provide all the visual cues the consumer is looking for.

Cooking up something for Little Giant

Zarney Creative's recent product launch for Little Giant Pump Company is an excellent example of how a core creative concept can help streamline the process and drive all the branding elements in a new packaging program. For more than 50 years, Little Giant had been a trusted name for high-quality pumps, filters, fountain nozzles, and other accessories used in home "water gardens." The company already had a successful packaging and merchandising program for its mass-market consumer line, which was sold through the big-box home centers. Recognizing the growing consumer interest in water gardening as a hobby, as well as a home-improvement activity, Little Giant wanted to find a way to increase market share without cannibalizing the mass-market line. The company decided to create a new line of products specifically designed for the lawn-and-garden-center retail market. Little Giant's marketing consultant, Equitec, asked us to help them brand this new line.

The inflexible elements

The program began in June 1998. Little Giant needed to have products ready to ship by January, which meant that everything had to be completed within six months. The plan was to introduce the new line at the International Hardware Show, in Chicago, in August, and that meant that all the main branding elements had to be developed in a matter of weeks if presentation mock-ups were going to be ready for the trade show. Furthermore, Little Giant's schedule would require our process to lead right into prepress production of the final art for the packaging if we were going to meet the January shipping date. In very short order, we needed a new name, a format for the packaging and merchandising, and updated point-of-sale consumer information materials, as well as trade and consumer advertising and promotional materials.

In addition to having a limited amount of time, we also had a limited creative budget. We didn't have the time, budget, or available locations to shoot new water gardening images. We had to find them in existing collections. With

that in mind, we decided to reuse product images from Little Giant's existing line of water-garden products. Any additional photography we wanted beyond the existing product shots needed to be royalty-free to give us the flexibility to develop all the program's promotional elements using the same set of master images. The few images we used that were rights-protected were made available to us for a one-time fixed fee based on specific usage.

With more than 100 SKUs in a wide variety of packaging formats—cartons, clamshells, polybags, foil bags, plastic bottles, and applied labels—we knew we were going to be working with multiple packaging vendors. And all the product information on the new packaging needed to be multi-lingual—English, French, and Spanish. As with any multi-lingual packaging program, the graphic format had to be designed to give equal play to all languages and make it easy to track that information on a "need-to-know" basis.

We knew the new brand was going to be sold in a merchandising environment different from Little Giant's mass-market line. For one thing, where the big-box stores have lawn and garden products both inside and outside the store, covered retail space in most lawn and garden centers is at a premium. Our new merchandising system had to function within a smaller footprint than the mass-market line did, but be able to grow if the demand was there. We also had to be sure to design the graphics on all the boxed items to accommodate multiple shelf orientations that would meet a variety of planogram options. Lastly, it was important that our packaging would work well on its own if a retailer cherry-picked the line and didn't take on the whole program.

Reviewing the opportunities

Our core creative concept needed to connect with two different profiles for our lawn-and-

Packaging that clearly communicates the availability of additional information online gives its brand a selling advantage. The trick is to make sure that experience is a good one

garden-center consumer. For those consumers new to water gardening, our goal was to communicate the visual pleasures of owning a water garden. For the enthusiast already involved with water gardening, we needed to emphasize the quality results our products would deliver. Both consumer groups needed our product information to be well-organized and easy to understand. Because water gardens can be designed to complement any number of architectural or aesthetic tastes, we decided to concentrate on the visual appeal of water—not on any specific style of water garden. This also allowed the consumer to create his or her own mental image of the water garden that was most appealing. Even better from a budget and timing standpoint, simpler visuals made the task of locating quality royalty-free images less complex. Reducing our core creative concept to the essence of the water-garden experience allowed all the program components to help “sell the dream.” It also made it possible to meet Little Giant’s business objectives, budget requirements, and tight timelines.

The new program would also be aimed at a more informed consumer—someone who was used to the more personal selling approach generally found at lawn and garden centers. Our new merchandising had to aid in that selling

process by providing the retailer, as well as the customer, with the educational tools and information needed to plan a water garden (and, for the retailer, to put together a product list). For the trade retailers at the International Hardware Show, we planned a presentation folder designed to get them excited about the growing consumer interest in water gardens and how they could benefit from the new business (figure 1).

One important and innovative new media tool Little Giant already had in place was their interactive Web site. It allowed shoppers to custom-design their ponds online and generate a shopping list of the products they needed. It also helped them locate the nearest Little Giant dealer. As far as the competition was concerned, we felt that competitive brands didn’t have Little Giant’s depth of knowledge and years of experience in servicing landscape professionals and water gardening enthusiasts, and we hoped to make the most of that.

PondWorks

The creative format we developed for the new packaging would drive all the other branding elements. Our challenge was to create something visually exciting that would also work as a system to help us quickly build the program. We

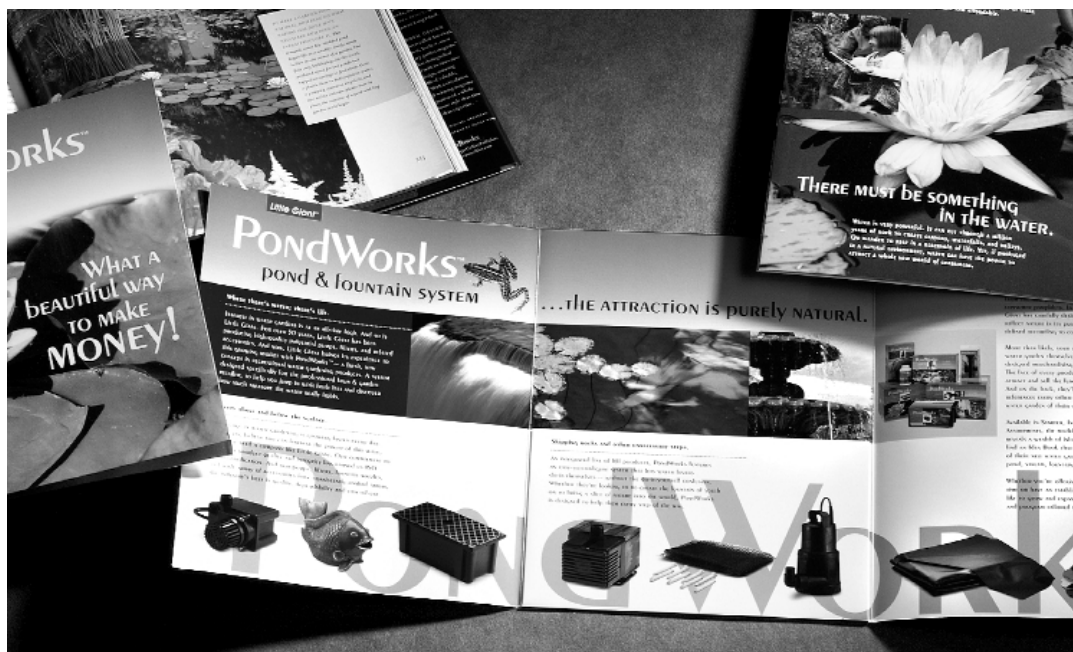


Figure 1. Selling the PondWorks program to the trade started with a presentation folder designed to get lawn and garden center retailers excited about the opportunity presented by the growing consumer interest in water gardening.

started by choosing a name—PondWorks—for the new line and developing the brand positioning and copy platform. The PondWorks name communicated all the right messages—it was simple, memorable, and reinforced the promise that our products were designed to work as a complete water-gardening system (figure 2). Coupled with the Little Giant trademark endorsement, consumers would know it was a new brand that could be trusted. A PondWorks logotype was developed to complement the Little Giant endorsement trademark. As part of the new visual identity, we selected a color we dubbed “PondWorks green” as our primary background color for the program.

Packaging the concept

Our new packaging format helped sell the dream by picturing close-up views of water-garden features, using a series of mainly royalty-free images to represent the different product categories in the line. We used these images throughout the program for all our key promotional materials. We also developed a graphic format and a color-coding system to organize PondWorks by product categories—pumps, filters, fountains, pond liners, lighting, accessories, and water treatments—with multi-lingual product information organized on “need-to-know”

prioritization. This made it very easy for the consumer or the retailer to find the right product and then access any specific product information he or she was looking for. We wanted to make sure you knew you had a waterfall pump rather than a filtration pump before we confused you with the gallons-per-hour information. Cross-reference charts were simplified and standardized on the back panels of all packages, making it easy for both retailer and consumer to find the correct products to build and maintain specific PondWorks systems.

We also developed a take-home brochure, the *PondWorks Planning Guide*, to explain the steps involved in building a water garden, and a book, the *PondWorks Idea Book*, which illustrated multiple pond and waterfall configurations. For the full effect, consumers could also purchase a video on how to construct a water garden. Little Giant’s professionals documented the entire process by building a beautiful water garden feature complete with fountains, streams, and waterfalls.

To maximize the limited lawn and garden center retail space, Equitec’s designers created a modular merchandising system that was easy to move and easy to add on to (figure 3). The PondWorks program would be available in starter, intermediate, and master dealer assortments. The modular system would allow retail-

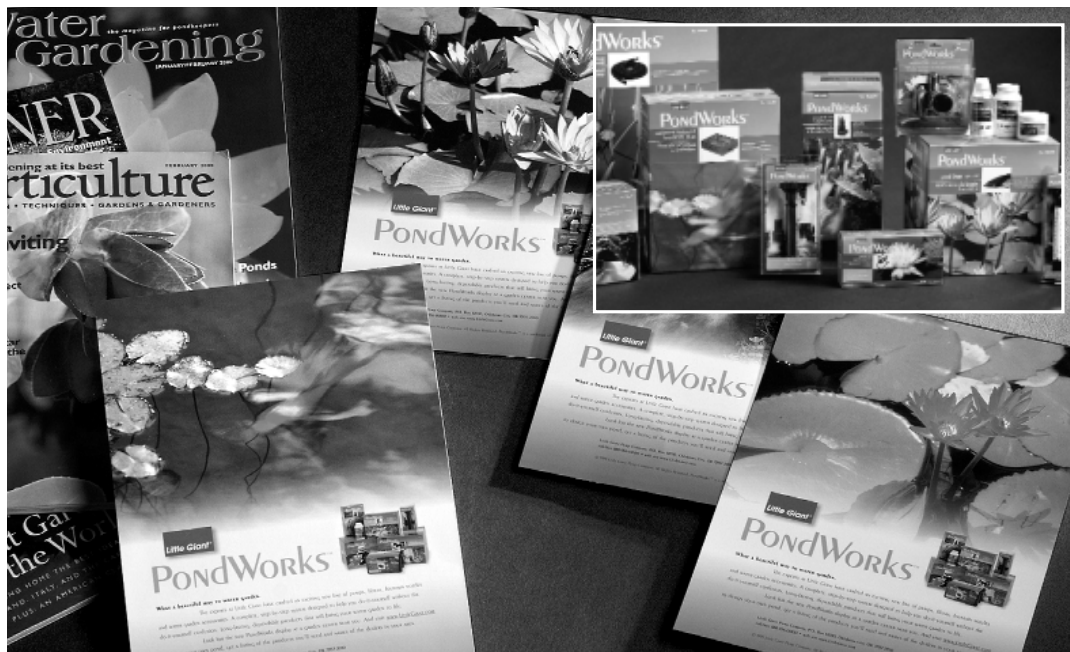


Figure 2. Trade and consumer advertising introduced the PondWorks program with a series of full-page ads utilizing the same images featured on the packaging and merchandising.

The PondWorks modular merchandising system utilized a series of 4-foot headers with the same bold images featured on the packaging.

The PondWorks *Planning Guide* is a take-home brochure designed to help consumers learn the right steps for planning a water garden.

The PondWorks *Idea Book*, a highly illustrated planning guide, shows multiple pond and waterfall configurations. Interested consumers could also purchase the more comprehensive *How to Build a Water Garden* video.



Figure 3. Knowing most lawn and garden centers have limited covered display space, the PondWorks merchandising program allowed the retailer to test the product line with a 4-foot starter section and to add sections as needed. The system included bold, colorful header panels featuring enlarged images from the product packaging and consumer information literature. The PondWorks packaging system utilized both color and pictorial coding to differentiate the various product categories. Multi-lingual product information was organized on a need-to-know format, designed to make it easy for retailers and consumers to find and match products for their water garden.

ers to test the new product line with an initial 4-foot section as a “starter assortment” to introduce the new line of water-gardening productions to their customers. Other 4-foot sections could be added as needed, all featuring various configurations of products, as well as copies of the *Planning Guide*, the *Idea Book*, and the water-garden video. To complement the packaging, we designed a series of bold interchangeable headers that ran across the tops of the displays, creating a strong visual “tone of voice” for the new brand.

Conclusions

Developing a core creative concept for PondWorks allowed our consultant and design teams to keep the program on target, on time, and on budget. PondWorks got off to a great start and continues to be a very successful and important product line for Little Giant. The lawn and garden center retailers quickly recognized that the new PondWorks product line was an opportunity to offer something unique to

their customers and create another source of profit for the business. Proof of that is the fact that water lilies and other aquatic plants are now being offered for sale at lawn and garden centers to support this new and growing interest in water gardening. Little Giant’s mass-market line was not adversely affected by this new venture. In both retail venues, customers know they are getting quality Little Giant products.

Taking time to develop a core creative concept benefits the entire enterprise. It clarifies thinking at the beginning of a product launch and, like a good recipe, continues to guide the company throughout the production process. With the right ingredients set out and ready to hand, cooking up a winner is easy to do. ■

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