



Investing in Creative Design

Sri Lankan brands must focus on creative design if they are to find international success, contends **Ruchi Gunewardene**.

Branding and design reflect the sophistication of a country and its commerce. In an era when intangible assets dominate the creation of value for enterprises and where proprietary breakthrough products or services are limited, an immense amount of value can be generated through powerful brands. These, in turn, need to be aesthetically presented and be relevant. This is the role of *design* in commerce.

Whilst the role of branding has only recently caught on in Sri Lanka, the importance of design is even less appreciated. Those companies which truly understand design will forge ahead in the future economy. In a world that competes for the attention of consumers, brands with outstanding design will always be ahead of their competitors.

Following the development of a product or service, and as the defining of its physical expression begins, design plays a vital role in the brand-creation process. The value of great designs impacts product, retail, service and corporate brands by differentiating themselves – and by creating a unique set of values. Those that are outstanding are even able to redefine the product category.

All these activities have a direct impact on the bottom line, since good designs attract and are able to convey the brand promise in a compelling manner. As a result, consumers shift loyalty as they try out the product or service, or would be more endeared towards it if they are already loyal consumers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN IN COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS: We have grown into a mass culture where telecommunications provides access to even the remotest parts of a country, bringing the world to our doorstep as a result. What this does is to educate consumers and constantly raise expectations. Therefore, consumers can no longer be expected to be satisfied with a poorly produced local product, because he or she knows what else is out there. They will only be satisfied once the product in their neighbourhood store is as good as that enjoyed by a trendy teenager down Fifth Avenue in New York. That, in essence, is the power of Coca-Cola.

Design gives a product beauty and dignity. It is very important to deliver a sign of beau-

ty to a consumer, because it shows that you are paying attention to detail. This means that not only do you have a superior product or service, but it also works in a beautiful manner. People do not just need bread anymore; they need bread given to them with great care! So, it is critically important to figure out how you want to serve it to them. This is true of both urban and rural consumers. Whilst they may be demographically segmented and thought to be different, they are emotionally comparable. Their disposable incomes may be diverse. Yet, intellectually and aspirationally, there are many similarities.

THE TOTAL DESIGN EXPERIENCE: In order to fully appreciate the power of design in creating value for a business, a curious student needs only to visit the Leela Palace Hotel in Bangalore. This hotel is an oasis in a sea of traffic and chaos. It was built relatively recently and modelled on the architecture of old Indian palaces. The beauty of the hotel, though, is how the architecture and the interior design blends the ancient with the contemporary, giving it an absolutely unique feel.

Not satisfied with merely creating the hardware, the hotel goes a step further to enhance its ambience. The sound of water through a trickling stream at the entrance immediately calms frayed nerves, even as you disembark from your taxi. Once you have dealt with the haggling taxi driver and walk into the spacious lobby, you are greeted by the soothing sounds of Indian music. And finally, to complete the total sensorial experience, the subtle wafting aroma of Indian spices fills the air!

This is the classic use of all the senses in creating a differentiated brand. The Leela Palace Hotel truly understands design. And what does it cost to stay at this seven-star plus sensorial design experience? It's the highest in the world – starting at over US\$ 500 per night! This is how design in a holistic sense can add a premium to your brand.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN PRODUCT BRANDS: Design plays a big part in creating ornaments, jewellery, cutlery, furniture, etc. Unfortunately, branding in these industries is still in its infancy in Sri Lanka. In furniture, companies such as A. T. Cooray must differentiate through design if they are to survive the plethora of imported-furniture products. Companies such as Dankotuwa Porcelain are now becoming more focused in this area of branding and design – and they are striving to deliver greater value.



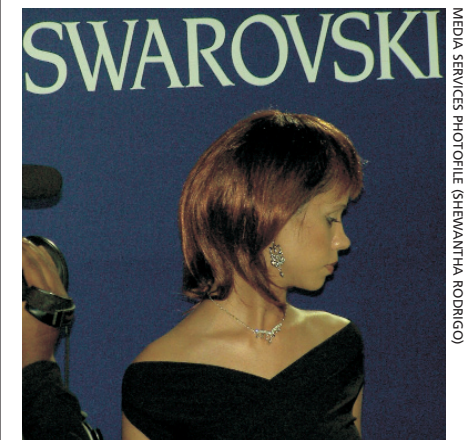
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Cutlery in Sri Lanka is largely unbranded, while jewellery designs – except for a few exceptions such as Stone 'n' String – have hardly changed over time.

All this reflects the tremendous opportunities that an entrepreneur has, in terms of creating new business by breaking out of the existing mould. In many of these instances, design can inspire a brand. Examples of cutting-edge international designs can be seen in Swarovski and Wedgewood, where the design defines the brand. The local equivalent is Paradise Road, whose products are designed by Shanth Fernando – often referred to as the 'Conran of the East'. Products sold in his outlets have a distinctive 'Paradise Road design', which is now an established trendsetter in Colombo.



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BRANDING

THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN PACKAGING: Packaging design has huge potential in Sri Lanka. Mlesna has been built largely on packaging design. It is the innovator of packaging in the tea industry. And it, too, understands design! There are severe limitations in finding packaging-design specialists in this country, however. And there aren't enough entrepreneurs pushing the boundaries of convention, and demanding and investing in cutting-edge packaging for their products.

There are two aspects to package design. One is the configuration of the package. The other is the illustration which adorns it. The cosmetic industry creates brands on these two dimensions alone. In order to fill this void, local companies should be doing their own research and development in packaging. These could include new printing techniques, developing new shapes, and the use of different materials and combinations of materials that go into packaging.

Whilst multinational companies have well-funded, centrally-located laboratories looking at these areas, no Sri Lankan FMCG company has established a research and development centre of its own as yet. This is required in order to find proprietary breakthrough ideas which can command premium prices.

Once the package configuration is mastered, the next step is to provide an appropriate graphic design which will take into consideration all mandatory regulatory requirements and capture the essence of the brand. Again, very few companies invest in



this area. Instead, they search for the cheapest graphics designer to create the surface of their packaging – which, incidentally, is the key interface with the consumer!

Multinationals have a huge advantage through the use of relevant fonts, contrasting colours, and using the right colour schemes, graphics and illustrations. Coca-Cola is a 120-year-old brand which has never changed its brand logo; yet, the rest of the graphic elements are continuously changed to keep the packaging modern and relevant – even to the present generation of teenagers. The inability to provide the attention that is required to basic packaging design is a huge disadvantage to many local brands, as they compete with the Unilevers, Nestlés and Fonterras of this world.

DESIGN IN SERVICE COMPANIES: Those companies which are operating in the service industry are potentially the most likely to benefit from a totally integrated brand and design concept. Take the banks in

this country. How many have a totally integrated interior-design format that links with its external branding? The red and white of HSBC stands out at every touch point, and so does the blue and green of Standard Chartered Bank. This should not involve a huge investment, as companies are committed to investing in their interior designs anyway. It does, however, involve a specialist capability. Just as service brands would want to ensure consistency in customer service by training their staff, it is also equally important to ensure that the service which is being delivered is consistently clean, relevant and conducive to the environment – so that customers experience the total sensorial brand offer, as is the case in the Leela Palace Hotel example.

With strategic branding at its core, the challenge is to be able to provide an experiential expression of the brand to customers through design: by having understood the essence of the brand, bringing it to life creatively and visually, whilst touching consumers in a manner that is unique – and with attention to the most minute detail. This enables the brand to be creatively captured, distilling and amplifying the brand in its most meaningful way to customers and stakeholders.

The economic case for investing in creative design has never been greater. Finding solutions to brands which are under pressure to create commercial success, by ensuring a sustainable competitive advantage, should be management's area of focus in the future – if Sri Lankan brands are to find international success.

The author is the founder of STING Consultants, Sri Lanka's only pure strategic-marketing and brand-consulting company. STING Consultant's associate companies include &Brand (strategic branding and creation), Brand Finance Lanka (brand valuation) and Superbrands Lanka (brand-recognition programme).

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