

# Brandhouse and beer branding

Mark Wickens

'Better understanding leads to better ideas and better ideas lead to better commercial success'. That was the mantra Brandhouse was founded upon in 1989. It was set up as the first Brand Agency - the combination of a strategic consultancy and a creative agency - and was created as an antidote to the use of design as 'aesthetic elastoplast' in the 1980s when brands and marketing agencies believed that a nice piece of design could patch up what was ulti-

mately a bad brand. Since the early 1990s Brandhouse has been pioneering new ways to help clients understand and use emotion to make people feel happy, confident, proud, inspired, and excited by their brands.

The founders of the agency had previously worked together on the entire Bass beer portfolio (on and off-trade) for over two years so in many ways Brandhouse was born with a heritage in beer brand-



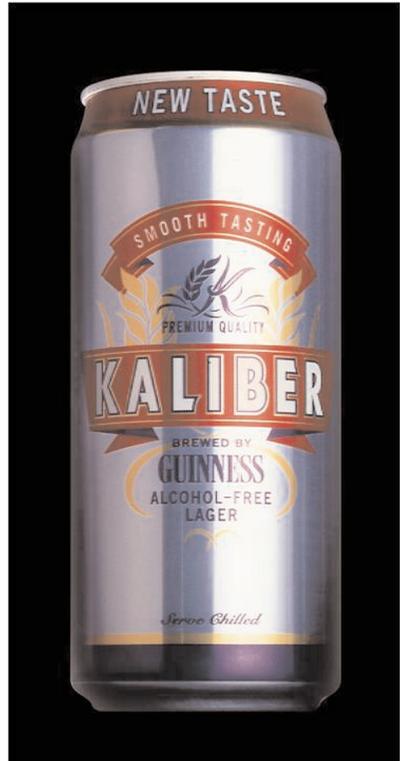


ing. We had created brand identities for Carling (from Carling Black Label to Carling), the biggest selling lager in the UK at the time - Lamot, Stone's Bitter and the whole Tennent's family.

Every successful agency needs one job that puts them on the map and it was via an ex-Bass client that this opportunity came. Tony Hillyer became the Marketing Director of Britvic and gave Brandhouse the job to redesign Tango - a brand in steep decline at the time. By appealing to teenagers' innate desire to rebel we positioned the brand as the soft drink that

acts like a lager. This became the key thought behind all of Tango's marketing communications and the soft drink became the marketing success story of the decade.

Over the past 20 years we've worked across almost all categories from pharma to broadcast but we've always had beer clients - Bass, Allied Breweries, Coors, Molson Coors, Diageo, Mitchell's and Butlers, Black Sheep Brewery and M&S amongst others. Our work has spanned



creating identities and revitalising brands to portfolio management and creating new brands, so you could say we've contributed to the development and evolution of beer branding. This has gone through something of a revolution of late; one that can be best understood by looking to the past.

In the 1970s and 1980s most beer labels conformed to a generic visual language - roundels, hops, barley, handcrafted typography, proud animals, pictures of



breweries, brewers signatures etc - which all added up to a singular idea: craftsmanship. Then, as printing technology improved in the 1990s allowing for better colour registration and better colour reproduction, beer packaging started to conform to the norms of modern supermarket marketing - big logos, simple design and strong colour combinations. Secondary packaging, usually featuring huge cropped off logos and close up shots of delicious golden lager, took an



ambiance of the modern pubs and bars and allow for more control of the pub/bar environment.

As for where beer branding is now, it has done a 360° turn; it's gone back to the future in search of inspiration. This is partly the result of a macro-trend affecting all walks of life. Increasingly people want to know more about the brands they buy and the products they consume

increasingly important role during this period, which saw craftsmanship motifs take a back seat to shelf standout. In the on-trade, traditional pubs were giving way to 'style bars' which saw the removal of the distinctive counter mounts (large lit plastic branding symbols with hidden pumps, e.g. the Carling ice block) in favour of a more subtle articulation of the bar surface. The introduction of the tall continental style brass pumps - where the only visible signs of branding are the pumps clips - are better suited to the





more trustworthy and more authentic, has seen an explosion of microbreweries across Europe and the USA - a beer culture that has long been dominated by big beer brands.

The sense of self-esteem that comes with discovery has always been at the heart of the way wine is marketed and beer is no different. A wine with a credible history and tradition can imbue its drinker



- how many food miles, where it was made and by whom, whether it is fair-trade etc. Consequently, we are more discerning in our choices than in the past and this is having an impact on how beer is marketed. The idea of craftsmanship has re-emerged and heritage and provenance are taking centre stage again. In addition, a movement away from big brand beer in favour of the niche and the quirky, which are perceived to be

with those same characteristics - this is the result of what is called 'the costly signalling theory'. Beer brands are increasingly playing this card and are meeting with much success. A combination of ever more sophisticated and discerning consumers, more experimental brewing methods and ingredients has seen a shift in perceptions in the role of beer. Once seen as the preserve of the pub-going male masses it has now been elevated to gourmet status in many cases, and a fitting accompaniment for fine food. This shift in perceptions is reflected aesthetically, perhaps unsurprisingly, with a nod toward new world wine. In fact, in many cases today's beers look like wines - both their labels and the shape of the bottle they come in. By breaking category rules, beer brands have been able to cause a disruption in consumer perception and encourage drinkers to try something new. The

iconography and language used on beer labels reinforces a sense of provenance, heritage and authenticity but avoids rehashing the motifs of the past in favour of more modern iterations.

Looking to the future, we will see the continued pursuit of the authentic across all categories, especially food and drink, including beer. Innovations in brewing techniques and pack structure will bring new consumers to the category, especially women, and with heightened anxieties due to the state of the environment we'll see an increasing emphasis put on 'localness'. And finally, with the introduction of the expected new legislature over the minimum price of alcohol, budget beer brands will have to begin to justify their increased price through quality credentials which will have interesting repercussions for the brands in the higher price points.

