

The Color of Ideas



Pantone is perhaps best known for its iconic Pantone Matching System, which has helped designers and printers identify and match colors for nearly 50 years. But the increasingly digital orientation of its customer base and the universal association of Pantone with a paper-chip book product conspired to create a growing perception of the company as a slow-moving monopoly that was behind the curve in terms of innovative tools and solutions.

Despite the company's revolutionary heritage and its deeply entrenched position in the graphic and textile design industries, Pantone's iconic color-chip book had long since become a day-to-day utility. The book, still a familiar and indispensable resource, no longer had top-of-mind importance to the influential design community in an environment increasingly powered by "whiz bang" digital tools.

To combat this perception of diminished importance, Pantone decided that it needed to reposition itself as a source of ideas and inspiration to the creative community rather than providers of a well-known, if somewhat under-appreciated, tangible product. At the same time, a more ideas-driven positioning would advance the company's desire to build a business of selling Pantone products to design-savvy consumers.

When we began working with Pantone in the

fall of 2005, our going-in view was not to discard the brand's rich heritage but rather use it as a springboard to evolve the external view of the firm.

WAKE-UP CALL

To get a better fix on internal perceptions of the company, we conducted extensive interviews of Pantone executives across all three businesses—consumer, graphics and textiles, in several markets around the world. Similar audits were conducted among Pantone's traditional customers and distributors in the printing, graphic arts and textile industries. We also surveyed current and prospective retailers about Pantone's consumer ambitions.

The need for change was underscored to Pantone's management when the research showed how different the external view of the company was from that of Pantone's own senior management team.

The key findings from the research showed that Pantone was seen to be integrally involved in color but by no means a brand that *owned* color. Moreover, its revolutionary color-chip book, introduced circa 1960, was no longer sufficient to drive a dynamic perception of the company. Evidence of new products and ideas were needed, as retailers were intrigued by the idea of Pantone products for consumers and wanted to know more. Finally, there was universal nostalgia and affection for the Pantone brand, for its past achievements and the hope of future success, which provided a reservoir of good will towards the brand.

Pantone founder Lawrence Herbert, his son Richard, and the rest of the management team wanted to respond to the B2B community's perception of Pantone through improvements to service and new product development. By undertaking a branding and communication campaign, Pantone would be viewed as a company *on the move*.

A critical takeaway that drove our thinking on brand positioning was that Pantone's B2B "producers" take cues about brands from B2B "creators" further

Pantone aspires to inspire the global creative community.



upstream. This steered our focus towards meeting the needs of the graphics and textile creative community and the idea of Pantone as a powerful inspiration for ideas.

To succeed in changing external perceptions, Pantone would need to demonstrate itself to be an important source of inspiration to creatives and thus a more integral part of the creative process.

CULTURAL FRONTLINERS

Our interviews with retailers and consumers happened in parallel with our B2B research. The interspersed nature of our work brought us more quickly to realize that consumers interested in Pantone bore a close resemblance to our professional creatives—driven by a similar curiosity and a desire to explore and discover what was going on in urban culture. We came to refer to this cross audience as *cultural frontliners* and their common interest in new and happening urban culture created an unexpected opportunity for marketing synergies for Pantone.

We proceeded to recast Pantone's corporate identity based on the more inspiration-driven idea encapsulated in the brand line "the color of ideas." On a parallel path, the company had an urgent need to go to market with noteworthy new products. These products would not only drive sales but also offer the marketplace proof-points that Pantone's promises of innovation and inspiration were for real.

Our first new product assignment was for a product we named the *huey*, a hand-held portable monitor for calibrating colors on a computer screen. Developed in concert with a joint-venture partner, *huey* is a sleek, inexpensive new generation of technology that held the promise of dramatically increasing the practice of calibration among consumers and professionals.

As such, the *huey* is poised to prompt longtime customers and prospects to talk about Pantone again, creating buzz in the design industry.

To date, the *huey* has generated significant press coverage, capturing numerous design and tech awards. It has captured the attention and orders of prominent consumer retailers, such as the Apple Store, that serve our crossover audience of cultural frontliners.

More recently, Pantone entered another crossover category of high-end residential paints. Pantone formed a partnership with Fine Paints of Europe, well-known overseas as a provider of superior, high-performance Dutch paints. Together, the two brands appeal to the demanding standards and inspired sensibilities of design-oriented consumers and the professional trade serving this market.

Through this partnership, architects, interior designers and consumers can match Pantone Paint colors with Pantone's Matching System color palettes. The paints eventually will be available at high-end hardware, decorating and home improvement retailers nationwide.

In truth, Pantone has been a source of ideas and inspiration to the global design community for nearly 50 years. Now it has brought to light a *brand truth* that simply needed to be uncovered.

Pantone's leadership team recognized the need to seize on the "idea of ideas" to project the company differently; a company that breaks the mold and welcomes the whimsy associated with creativity—as in the naming of *huey*.

In so doing, Pantone is not only reshaping external views of the company but is also reshaping its view of itself. ■



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