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Designing brand identity: From product innovation to branding

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Designing brand identity: From product innovation to branding

by

Montel Caruthers

A dissertation thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Graphic Design

Program of Study Committee:
Sunghyun Kang, Major Professor
Andrea Quam

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
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ABSTRACT

Product design is one of the most important industries in today’s world of fast innovation, meaningful design, and continued consumption. Brands are living organizations who have developed products and services with a desire to have a successful and mutually beneficial relationship with the people they serve.

The goal of this project is to accomplish a brand identity that is true to the value of product design and its relationship to the target users. Through literature review, visual market analysis, design, prototyping, and packaging design, a complete identity has been developed to uniquely present a new brand into the sports medicine market. Targeted toward every crucial stakeholder in the process, this identity serves as the representation of how graphic design and branding can elevate the perception, experience, success, and loyalty of products and services in the marketplace.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1.1 Background of the Product and Project Purpose

The industries that most directly affect the daily lives and well-being of individuals are those that have a unique opportunity to touch the humanity of our being in a way that either serves as an improvement or detriment to our quality of life, development, enjoyment, recovery, or service. One such important industry of product development is in the sports medicine field. Every day individuals are living with ailments, injuries, participating in therapy, recovery, and that process is much affected by the products that facilitate the process.

In a sponsored studio with United Sports Brands-McDavid, I was given the opportunity to develop a maximum level protective ankle brace for basketball athletes. The design process behind the brace included innovative and collaborative methods of design with every crucial stakeholder in the process. This made the design successful enough to win the United Sports Brands Design Achievement Award. This brace, uniquely marketed to basketball players through aesthetic brand visibility, athletic trainers through physiological advancements in construction, and retailers with a new marketing strategy, created an opportunity to develop a new brand from the unique positioning of this product. The design environment that created the opportunity for this project was a sponsored studio within the industrial design department of Iowa State University in 2017. The design objective was given by the sponsor, United Sports Brands, was to develop a sports medicine product specifically for basketball players. The open space for opportunity allowed me to dive into the culture of basketball from a physically competitive, visual and brand-related, product and purchasing, and trust and
physiological and technical areas of value and demand that were derived from each of the key product stakeholders. Upon my research, the astounding study results showed that 13% of all sports injuries per year in competitive sports were basketball ankle sprains, and 90% of those sprains were inversion sprains (Waterman, 2010). An inversion sprain is defined as an inward roll of the ankle from the distal side of the body to the proximal side of the body (Waterman, 2010).

Branding is a vital part of the success of a product and largely contributes to purchasing behavior over time. The elements of a brand are largely based on the characteristics, values, and mission of those who birthed it. The multi-platform presentation and engagement with the target customers are largely based on the desired perception and relationship that brands would like to facilitate and maintain over time. The goal of this project is to develop a brand identity that is true to the value of product design and its relationship to the target users.

**Chapter 1.2 Existing Product Analysis and Brand Development Origins**

Brands are living organizations who have developed products and services with a desire to have a successful and mutually beneficial relationship with the people they serve. The general population and the target population for a brand are the individuals in search of a relationship that they can trust, a product or service that provides what it promises, and is a relationship that is desirable and beneficial to their quality of life. To this group of people, their expectations are direct and simple, "Understand me. Make a difference in my life. Surprise me often. Give me more than I paid for. Show me you love me" (Alan Jacobson, Wheeler, 2017, p. xii).
Upon studying the nature of inversion sprains, how they occur, and what design interventions have been developed to prevent and resist the injury, my initial design concepts led me to an innovation wall. I developed mediocre concepts that did not provide significant value over the current market offerings in a way that justified a new product introduction to the ankle brace market. The next step in the design process is what led to the successful final outcome of my brace design and provided the unique context of the brand development project now outlined in this thesis. Interviews were conducted with the sports medicine directors of Iowa State University. This study identified the products that they used, the brands they trusted, and why they chose certain brands based on their own criteria as a health professional. The insights from sports medicine professionals gave me an understanding that the brands that they used were primarily Active Ankle, and secondarily McDavid and other comparable brands. The reason that the experts favorited Active Ankle was that the company gained their trust as experts of understanding the biometric capabilities and limitations of ankles and ankle structures in order to design anatomically correct support features around performance and recovery. The communication of their expertise was clear on the packaging as advanced features and physiological data were presented through graphics and text on their packaging and informational inserts.

The second most used brand, McDavid, was primarily a favorite of the basketball athletes themselves. The athletes liked the aggressive packaging graphics and personal statements about the performance that heavily targeted the athlete's social perception. The intentionality toward athletes created a desire to wear their brand, along with sufficient physiological data on the packaging to communicate knowledge necessary for the design. After understanding the branding strategies and effectiveness in engaging their target
audiences, I worked with the director of sports medicine, Victor Miller to understand the most effective and well-known strapping and support methods used by trainers. He directed me to the heel lock technique, combined with stirrup designs and top horizontal finish strap. The combination of these directional strips and the anatomically correct placement prevented inward and outward rotation of the heel in such a way that an attempt at inversion would result in the entire leg inverting. This would fire the stabilizing muscles of larger body groups and result in a fall or correction, rather than turning the ankle incorrectly.

The eventual outcome of my design efforts was to refine the heel lock method in a way that used a significantly lower amount of material to achieve the same wrapping goal of the brace design. The aesthetic result was to capture the product graphics and perception of basketball shoe culture into the presentation of the brace. The result included a brace that was the sturdiest of any brace in the market, the most comfortable choice of breathable and wearable materials, and an opportunity to present a uniquely developed product to retailers that could command attention against the biggest competitors.

Such an outcome of product design prompted the opportunity for me to develop a brand around the unique product. The research for brand comparison both visually and functionally in the market was complete, and the space in the market for a uniquely marketed and developed brace for multiple stakeholders was born. The object of the creative component project then was to learn the process of brand identity development. What factors and foundations were necessary to establish brand identity, how to theorize the visual creations of a symbol, uses of color and typography, and touchpoints of interaction were my goals of designing a brand identity. Through the review of several literary sources, I was able to follow the process of identity creation that resulted in Elevate Performance Gear.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

After creating a meaningful product or service offering that customers will find a valuable addition to their lives, a brand can be structured to develop an infrastructure and medium to deliver the product and service over time through a relationship with the customers. One of the first steps in designing brand identity is conducting market research. “Market Research is the gathering, evaluation, and interpretation of data affecting customer preferences for products, services, and brands” (Wheeler, 2017, p. 124). To properly understand the unique opportunities of a brand for successful positioning and longevity, one must understand the current market space. The research can but is not excluded to evaluating each competitor who provides the same, similar, or secondary services that may provide an alternative to the services provided to a given brand. A thorough approach to evaluating the market competition is to examine and compare the competitors’ brand, identity, target market, visual and presentational methods, the vibe in their relationship with users, and the overall consistency in their method of engagement with their target market (Wheeler, 2017).

After analyzing the results of the market comparison, building a brand brief is the next logical step to establish the foundations of a brand identity. “The brand brief is a foundational document that clearly articulates who we are and why we exist” (Matt Hanes, Wheeler, 2017, p. 142). This document is the launching point and the content to which the identity is designed around. The components of the brief succinctly communicate the attributes, target audiences, core purpose, positioning, mission, and vision of the brand (Wheeler, 2017). The reason for being, communicated through a brand brief is an objective set of descriptions that, when done correctly, formulate the direction of all products and services, the identity and its visual and physical representation, and the overall brand profile
to which users will evaluate through multiple means of engagement in order to determine the relationship of purchase and loyalty.

Upon developing the foundational values and propositions of the brand, the name is the next step in the design process. “Names need to be judged against positioning goals, performance criteria, and availability within a sector” (Wheeler, 2017, p. 144). The name is incredibly important because it captures the source of the message. It is the identified personal institution of the service offered, and the content of social, economic, and competitive conversation and engagement. For me to successfully establish a name, I revisited my brand goals and the needs of the market in order to most effectively communicate my intent to position this brand toward multiple stakeholders. “If you wish to make a meaningful statement, a name change is not enough. The name should represent a unique, beneficial, and sustainable story that resonates with customers, investors, and employees” (Durbrow, Wheeler, 2017, p. 146).

![Process: Naming](image)

*Figure 2.1 This figure illustrates the processed followed for naming the brand.*

Upon deciding a name, I next needed to create a logo and symbol mark that visually represented my brand. The logo is “A distinctive symbol of a company, object, publication person service, or idea” (Adams, 2004, p. 16). The visual representation of my brand would
communicate the attributes and promises of the company in the fastest association that the brand can offer in the context of user engagement. Answering who, what, and why in terms of translating my textual descriptions into an identifiable mark were methods of early development in logo design (Adams, 2004). The targeting of a complex message to two distinct user groups, trainers and athletes was a challenge. With two distinct users with unique and sometimes overlapping values, the understanding was developed that the logo is a representation of my brand to the customer, and not necessarily a representation of the users themselves. This was helpful in the description, "The logo is a signpost that identifies the company and reflects its and values…a logo should simply be a shortcut, a visual language that is quickly recognizable and memorable" (Adams, 2004, p. 25).

Two methods were impactful in my understanding of developing an effective logo. “Pose a question. If the viewer is given all the facts, there is little reason for him to process the information. Alternatively, if the question is presented, and the viewer must provide an answer in his head, he will be forced to spend more time with the message and therefore become more intimate with it” (Adams, 2004, p. 33). The development of a logo is not to prescribe, nor is it to be misunderstood or not understood. This relates to the second method of consideration, “Make mnemonic value” (Adams, 2004, p. 31). The shape and color should incorporate the historical nature and association with shape, along with the learned and emotional responses to design elements. For example, sharper angles are often in any context and culture associated with risk, speed, or movement. Heavier weight lines are associated with stability, heaviness, and solidity. These associations can be altered in exclusive examples to individuals but when combined effectively with the general understanding and
learned associations of a target market, an effective relationship of desirability can be created between brand and customer.

After the logo, considerations for typography, color, and design applications were reviewed in how to successfully develop these assets in an effective and meaningful manner. “Color is used to evoke emotion and express personality. It stimulates brand association and accelerates differentiation…Choosing colors requires a core understanding of color theory, a clear vision of how the brand needs to be perceived and differentiated, and an ability to master coherence and meaning over a broad range of media” (Wheeler, 2017, p. 154). The exploration of color as outlined later in this study was formulated around the associations of athletic culture, medical environments, and the representation of my brand as a unique offering to unify target markets in a compelling and approachable manner.

Typography is a core building block of an effective identity program. Many brands are immediately recognizable in great part due to their distinctive and consistent typographic style. Typography must support the positioning strategy and information hierarchy (Wheeler, 2017). The use of typographical hierarchy in my branding identity development directly related to the hierarchy of my brand attributes and desires for engagement with my audiences. The size, weight, and shape of my typographic choices must coincide with my desire to appeal to the athletic and active environment of users and the professional and trustworthy nature of medical professional environments.
CHAPTER 3. DESIGN PROCESS

Chapter 3.1 Brand Foundations, Attributes, and Mission

The design process began with the evaluation of what branding meant to me as a product designer, and what opportunities for learning I wanted to explore through this creative component project. I am particularly interested in the entire experience of a user with a product, not only through thoughtful functional design but also through information engagement, how interactions with products and brand touchpoints can create a brand engagement that can last over time.

The first step of my process of developing the Elevate brand identity was to examine the strengths, weaknesses, and attributes of the product that I designed. The ankle brace was born of unique product innovation, multi-stakeholder marketing appeals, comfort, and ease of use intentionality, along with aesthetic and contextual considerations for basketball culture. The analysis of this brace led me to develop the contents of my brand brief to establish the foundational characteristics and values of my brand. My brand attributes, stemming from the design objectives of the brace design toward the users included: being authentic, brave, passionate, accessible, best in quality, cutting edge in innovation, distinct in presentation, and user-centered. I took the top five most definitive and important qualities from this list to build the identity from, listed from most important to least: best in quality and reliability, user and customer-centered, distinct in presentation, accessible, and cutting edge in innovation. The target audiences for the company was crucial in developing the mission and vision of the company in relation to my attributes because the attributes would be the relational qualities that would resonate with my target audiences as incorporated into my brand applications. The two targeted populations for the brace would first include basketball athletes of all ages who
desired the maximum level of protection against ankle sprains and to protect them during the recovery process after injuring a sensitive ankle. The second target user was the athletic trainer or sports medicine specialist who refers braces to athletes and teams. This user cares mostly about the reliability of the brace, the quality of design, and physiological correctness and innovation for ankle support. The athletes had a higher priority toward the aesthetic presentation of the brace and the comfort and usability of the product.

Toward these target markets, I developed the mission of my brand to “To provide the best quality performance gear in a way that is user-centered from all design offerings to all forms of presentation and user engagement”. The vision statement to accomplish this mission is to “Reach and engage our customers through different media platforms that maintain a unique engagement with our target markets while providing the best performance gear in the market.” The beginning characteristics of the brand, the unique mission, and the product provided a unique market positioning strategy that would drive the design of brand identity applications to convey an accurate and consistent message of who my brand is and why we exist.

**Chapter 3.2 Competitive Market Analysis**

The next step in the process was to evaluate the biggest competition in the sports medicine product market in terms of their credibility with trainers, preferences from athletes, and presentation of their identities to users through forms of engagement. The two brands that hold the most competition and credibility in the market is McDavid for athletes and Active Ankle for sports medicine personnel. The McDavid brand utilizes a color palette of black, white, darker red, along with bold graphics of text, dynamic and aggressive photography, and a very consistent brand message of resilience, toughness, and performance. Active Ankle is most recommended by trainers and is valued because of their clear
presentation of their expertise in understanding the biomechanics of the body and how design features directly affect the movement and needs of the body structure on a physiological level. They present complex and detailed diagrams of their products that highlight anatomical expertise and utilize a color palette of orange, black, green, and white. The color presentation and text are heavily medical and scientific in nature and can resonate a level of expertise to the language of trainers, but not the personal connection with athletes that McDavid accomplishes. Based on this analysis, I wanted to uniquely name and present the brand toward both target populations, athletes and trainers. The name should capture the goal and emphasis of the brand, and one that resonates with users, and the subsequent decisions of color, typography, logo, and application materials should cohesively communicate the priorities of each user group.

Chapter 3.3 Naming the Brand

The naming process was an important, but difficult step to accomplish. “The name should represent a unique, beneficial, and sustainable story that resonates with customers, investors, and employees” (Wheeler, 2017, p. 146). I listed names based on the attributes of my brand while trying to maintain a concise and relatable name for both athletic culture and sports medicine professional preferences. I tried using variations of activity, motion, medical terms, association with ankle braces, and words that capture the essence of my attributes. Such elements included velocity, medical, support, kinetics, biomechanics, locking to reflect the heel lock method of protection and simple but more abstract representations of the brand goal. Upon narrowing down my options to the most appropriate and effective names, I refined my list to Valid, Mbrace, Elevate, Medisport, and Atel. These names all accomplished a quick association with some aspect of athletic or medical cultures, and ultimately Elevate was chosen because of its simplicity, relationship to athletic performance
and the goal to improve athletes’ lives. Also, Elevate is something that can be related to the quality and effectiveness of the design, being that it provides an improvement from understanding the existing position and what it takes to achieve the next improved state.

**Table 3.1** This figure illustrates the competitive analysis of the two most competitive brands in the ankle brace market to date.
Chapter 3.4 Designing a Logo

The logo design process was the most extensive and time-consuming step in the process of designing a brand identity. "The logo is a signpost that identifies the company and reflects its and values...a logo should simply be a shortcut, a visual language that is quickly recognizable and memorable" (Adams, 2004, p. 25). The logo is to capture the associations of the name, relationship to the user, hold as the topic of conversation and comparison, and represent the visual and contextual presence of the brand in the product environment.

The process began with sketches for each set of the top five attributes of the Elevate brand characteristics. Each attribute was utilized to develop sketches of shapes, symbols, and abstractions of the attribute in a concise way to resonate with users. The refined concepts were moved into the digital workspace of Adobe Illustrator to refine the quality of the ideas. Most of the visual elements included in the shapes were some dynamic angles and line qualities of motion to resonate with the performance focus of what Elevate would provide to users. Softer elements of curves and shapes were used to highlight the user-centeredness and accessibility attributes of Elevate’s brand mission. The association of quality and protection with the shape of a shield emerged as a strong representation of the brand and its purpose. The softer curves of the body of a shield represent coverage and approachability, and the sharper elements of motion and angles of lines could communicate speed and athleticism. Together these elements could provide the association of protection, accessibility, improving performance with athletic mobility, and simplistic qualities that a logo should embody to quickly present itself.

The final iterations of the logo intended to provide a more direct relationship of the attributes of the shield, movement, and elevation with the origins of the company in specialized ankle brace design and innovation. Three steps of progressive dynamic
quadrilaterals provided a visualization of the elevation in performance, quality, and design that are provided by the brand. An abstraction of an ankle was incorporated into the body of the shield both to highlight the accessibility of the design in opening the closed body of a shield, but it also provides a fast understanding with the expertise of the brand in sports medicine design, and the body of the user who will use and value the product. Between two final versions, one including the top elevation shapes as squared and the other as open and dynamic, I chose to use the dynamic shapes to maintain the speed and movement desires of athletes and focus of our brand to maintain and elevate performance.

Figure 3.2 This figure illustrates the final two logo iteration designs.

Chapter 3.5 Color and Typography

Color has the power to evoke emotional association, contextual memory, and embody traits of cultures, systems, or objects. In choosing my color pallet, I wanted to continue my bi-directional design intent toward athletes and trainers. I chose darker hues of blue as they represent authoritative, reliable, and service quality professionalism (Eiseman, 2006). Orange
was chosen as the secondary color because it is a universal color of acceptance and approachability; it presents nurturing qualities and self-assurance (Eiseman, 2006). It can also communicate exploration of thought and innovation, an absence of fear of expression or improvement. It also embodies the power of red, without the aggressiveness, along with symbolizing a strong and creative personality (Carter, 2001). Black and white were chosen to supplement the pallet. Black adds a level of empowerment, sophistication, and invulnerability to the brand while white brings a level of purity and clinical association (Eiseman, 2006).

My brand fonts were chosen based on the hierarchy of my brand attributes and their visual elements as perceived by my two primary target markets. “Choosing the right font requires a basic knowledge of the breadth of options and a core understanding of how effective typography functions. Issues of functionality differ dramatically on a form, a pharmaceutical package, a magazine ad, and a website. The typeface needs to be flexible and easy to use, and it must provide a wide range of expression. Clarity and legibility are the drivers” (Wheeler, 2017, p. 158). I chose Century Gothic in a bold weight to carry the titles, brand name, and headings of typographic applications. I also chose this san serif font to communicate modernity and approachability, but also the lower-case title style to communicate accessibility and user-centeredness. The pairing of this heavier and larger font with my subtitle and body text font, Gaduji, provides a thinner stroke and simpler typeface for all caps emphasis, along with easy readability.

Chapter 3.6 Design Applications

My chosen design applications were based on the context of user engagement of my target markets. The most direct and important application would be the packaging of the
product, as this communicates the brand identity through all of its visceral elements, the communication of form and function, and the differentiation points between my brand and our offerings against the competitors’ efforts. The packaging design form took the resemblance of the logo itself, representing the shield as the main element of focus. This first association of a protective and preventive product with an object historically associated with protection and safety helps create a cohesive message of the brand and its offerings. The shield shape was chosen as the packaging shape to take advantage of the opportunity of entering the market with a new brand alternative. There is an opportunity to engage users in a retail environment that has become familiar over time to loyal buyers. Users with established brand relationships and new users looking to evaluate product offerings can be visually engaged by Elevate’s differentiation of packaging shape, color, and activation of the retail space. Providing a visual differentiation in shape and brand association in this space creates a bold statement of entry that communicates the service of protection and user-centeredness that Elevate offers its customers. The shield shape and brand color differentiation emphasize the focus of Elevate to provide a unique level of visual and experiential engagement with users. Considering the details of the closer interaction with the products once initial interest is created, the logo and the product are the two most prominent elements on the packaging because the visualization of what is inside is important for users to engage with the item they cannot yet interact with.

For the hierarchy of text and color, I allowed contrast and emphasis on the front of the box to highlight the product as the main focus, the brand and its blue background as the provider of the service and the sign of the shield, and the orange as the connecting element of color between graphical and textual information. Orange brings emphasis to pertinent
information in a way that supplements the primary visual elements of the brace and the descriptive type. The side panels include visualizations of users of the brace and potential ambassadors of the brand. I intentionally chose everyday users instead of sponsored athletes because I wanted to emphasize that Elevate is a brand that is relatable and approachable. It is a desirable brand interested in strong relationships with its customers, and a willingness to make them the focus of their efforts.

The print media such as business card, letterhead, and envelope display applications of the branding identity in the business engagement environment. This space is where the brand will engage with clients, retailers, customers, and other business tasks. The letterhead, envelope, and business card all continue the hierarchy of blue reliability and trust, with orange supplementing important information to the main message of the content. The three vertically progressive dynamic quadrilaterals mark the corner of each design application, to represent its presence at the forefront of brand engagement, and abstractly resemble the logo elements in a simplified and exclusive manner from the logo application. All applications of the logo, type, and color are consistent in their placement, hierarchy, and use for content engagement with users such that Elevate is presented as an organized and user-centered company that values the experience of its customers.
CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

The processed outlined by Alina Wheeler in “Designing Brand Identity” is a thorough and comprehensive process to bring a level of professionalism and meaningful engagement of a service to the audience they serve. Following this process, I learned that products live in a system of collaborative culture within an organization. Every successful brand must have stable foundations of who they are, why they exist, and what they do best. They also must always stay true to the identity of who they are and design their levels of engagement with their target audiences to accomplish a clear and consistent message. The design elements of a brand, how they speak of themselves through design and interaction with users, must always engage at the personal levels of the desires and preferences of the audience. The culture and nature of the environment that products and services live in will call for multiple platforms and systems of engagement that must be manageable long term and still allow for future growth and adaptability. These brand identity applications can include packaging, websites, social media accounts, brochures, mailing media, virtual platforms, and physical interactions with people and services.

My brand result fits into the category of brands that begin from product innovation and need an infrastructure of a strong identity to exist and compete effectively in an established market of product offerings in sports medicine. Particularly, color, typography, and photography can create a cohesive message that an audience can connect and relate with or create dissonance and distrust. The inconsistencies in design elements and platform presentations of a brand, especially in the status and aesthetic world of athletics, can result in massive failure to maintain brand loyalty or draw in new customers. The process of development in branding identity is iterative, collaborative, and should be conducted for a
significant amount of time to appropriately consider all aspects of success, protection, competitiveness, effectiveness with users, and uniqueness in presentation.

Regarding the results of this project, I would like to explore the design applications of the Elevate design identity to where the two target user groups are secondarily engaging with brands and competitive content. This would include a web and social media presence for athletes to have digital interactions and promotions with the brand and their spheres of influence. The platforms where sports medicine professionals engage with information is also heavily through word of mouth, web resources, and presentations of product innovations to institutions to gain trust and build relationships. This would provide a unique opportunity to explore a different presentation medium of interaction that would most likely include demonstrations, possible video illustrations, and other forms of visual and interactive communication to gain the trust of medical professionals. Lastly, I believe more success in further development would be achieved in exploring the brand presentation at the point of purchase in retail stores. A majority of the purchases for braces in the everyday market take place in retail stores, where visual engagement is key in attracting and engaging with users to the point of purchase, satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

Taking these lessons and opportunities for further development will help solidify my skillsets and experience in designing brand identity and push me to be a multi-dimensional product designer with knowledge of the full experience of brand and user engagement. The invaluable lessons of how image, shape, color, typography, and understanding context and designing for engagement will assuredly improve the quality of design of any individual application of a brand touchpoint and provide me with a successful framework to approach products and branding projects in the future. This study and the guidance of my committee
members have provided me with an elevated understanding of the value of people, products, services, brands, relationships, and the impact of design in bridging the gaps between these stakeholders of my current and future services.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. DESIGN PROCESS