

SEASONED TO PERFECTION

Rebrand elevates DennyMike's offering and provides more value to the brand's fans.

BY ROBERT LEROSE

Rebranding a popular product line can be a difficult balancing act in package design. The reboot has to appeal to current loyal customers without sacrificing the product's soul and, at the same time, be bold enough to break into new markets.

DennyMike's brand of authentic Texas-style barbecue seasonings and sauces faced the challenge of transforming its cute packaging and comical signature design into a more sophisticated, witty style for high-end retailers.

The tone of the brand hadn't changed much since it hit store shelves in 2006. "It had more of a California surfer look," says founder Dennis Michael Sherman. "The symbol for DennyMike's was a big-footed, larger than life caricature that was freewheeling, casual and fun."

While the eccentric comic-like character might have resonated with consumers, the overall brand and design strategy worked against DennyMike's. The bottled sauces came in 8-oz. flask-style glass containers that were smaller and more expensive than competing

brands. The 3-oz. tins had a window on the front cover that allowed sunlight to deteriorate and discolor the seasonings, which were packed in a hard-to-use Ziploc bag. Whatever high-end cues were conveyed by the expensive packaging were cancelled out by the label design, which might be relatable and memorable but certainly doesn't connote premium.

"We were five and six times higher than the normal grocery label barbecue," Sherman says. "That unit cost label on the shelf was absolutely scaring me. We had to react or we would have been toast completely."

HIGHER VALUE, LOWER PRICE

Sherman and his production manager, Brian Walker, decided to switch to a larger bottle. They started with half a trailer of 14-oz. bottles and the decision to debut new packaging at a more economical \$4.99, which still kept the brand in the desirable category of a super premium specialty food.

Sherman then brought in his long-time design agency Pulp+Wire to come up with a

new look that was more appropriate for a small batch, all natural product line. "The challenge was to have a high-end product that's sophisticated, but also to marry this and balance it with a very personality-driven brand," says Taja Dockendorf, owner and creative director.

Dockendorf's team began an intense period of research—going to stores and photographing the seasonings section, interviewing customers to find out what they liked about the original DennyMike's packaging, looking at brands in a range of categories to see how they articulated their core brand values through design. This research helped drive the development of mood boards for the project.

"We knew we wanted to keep bright, punchy colors for the purpose of brand recognition," says Katie Bernier, Pulp+Wire's senior designer on this project. "That's one thing that people have repeatedly said that they love." Dockendorf and Bernier toned down the gradients of the original colors, though, to give the new labels a cleaner, more polished look.





LEFT The original packaging featured hard-to-use tins, smaller bottles, caricatured images and a busy design.

BELOW Bold colors, velvety labels, shrink sleeves, and a cleaner look give new life to the DennyMike's product line.



CREATING A LUXURIOUS FEEL

As humor was an integral part of the brand from the start, the creative team worked closely with Sherman to come up with new ways to reinforce a droll, grown-up sensibility. They kept the jubilant names of the rubs—Sublime Swine, Cow Bell Hell, Fintastic Seafood, Chick Magnet, Pixie Dust—but added fresh taglines, such as “Getting sauced since 2003” and “Season the day.” Even the DennyMike’s cartoon character got a facelift, converted from an outlandish surfer dude to a mature, fun-loving guy.

Pulp+Wire wanted paper for the labels that

would instantly feel and look rich, befitting the spirit of the re-imagined brand. “We chose a bamboo texture because it was more elevated than a standard wood texture,” Dockendorf says. “The lines were very soft and very clean, but it allowed our brighter colors to pop off of the softer bamboo texture, making it unique for this brand.”

An opaque label was chosen at the suggestion of DennyMike’s label supplier, GS Label. “It gives the necessary background to make the inks jump a little bit better,” says Jen Dutton, sales manager.

GS Label printed the labels on a high quality, 60-lb. semi-gloss paper that was coated with a 1-mm imprintable overlaminates, giving a luxurious velvety feel to the wood grain background and providing more protection than a varnish. “It also makes the label a little thicker and gives better coverage on the glass containers,” she says.

Round bead glass bottles replaced the flask-style bottles for the sauces. The unwieldy 3-oz. container with exposed bag was replaced with a user-friendly shaker tin with snap-on lids for

either light sprinkling or wide-mouth pouring of the seasonings.

SHRINK SLEEVES IMPROVE THE PROCESS

Both types of containers took advantage of shrink sleeves done by Gintzler Graphics. Made of a 50-micron thick layer of polyethylene terephthalate glycol, the shrink sleeves provided a tamper-evident seal and were printed with “Gluten Free” and “Fat Free” taglines. “With DennyMike’s, they were packaging the seasonings in preprinted tins. So if an ingredient changed, the tins were no good,” says Kent Noble, packaging specialist at Gintzler. Printing text on the shrink label, such as the expiration date or changes in compliance, saves the company time, labor, and money.

While it is still early to tally final results, orders for the rebranded tins and bottles are up 50%, according to Sherman. He also reports that L.L. Bean, which dismissed the old packaging as too cute, is now seriously considering adding the revamped product line to their inventory.

“Packaging is everything in this business,” Sherman says. “If you don’t evolve, if you don’t continually try to keep current, your packaging can kill you.” ●

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