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MARKETING



Top photo: The "old" version of KFC's Colonel logo

Below it: the version that Tesser completed.

"The new Colonel Sanders logo is more youthful and energetic, while the addition of an apron provides context for a new generation of consumers who are unaware of the Colonel's passion for cooking and his 'hands-on attitude,' according to Tesser's promotional material.

Third photo: KFC returns to its original name, Kentucky Fried Chicken, incorporating new signage.

Art is in the wallet of the beholder

Reimagining your brand may not be cheap, but it's an investment that pays off in multiple ways

"We don't create art, we create solutions," says brand imaging firm Tesser's CEO Tre Musco. Attractive solutions sell—food, products and franchises.

By Nancy Weingartner

Imagine taking on an assignment akin to re-designing the American flag.

OK, so KFC's Colonel isn't quite in the same league as Betsy Ross's stars and stripes, but it is still a little daunting to be asked to put a new face on an American icon.

"This wasn't an abstract image," points out Tre Musco, chief creative officer and CEO of Tesser, a San Francisco-based brand-imaging firm. Col. Harland Sanders was a real person who started one of the most successful brands in America.

But Musco took the assignment in stride: Putting a brand's best face forward is Tesser's specialty.

The multi-disciplinary design firm has worked with fast-food giants like Pizza Hut and Haagen-Dazs and also midsize concepts like Figaro's Pizza, which just recently went through a brand reimagining with Tesser.

When KFC asked Tesser to refresh the Colonel's image, they first reviewed the history of the Colonel. One study that caught their attention found that most young people thought of the Colonel as a "chicken sales guy," Musco said. Their exposure to the Colonel was limited to the dancing animated versions of the Colonel from commercials a few years ago. After exhaustive research, Tesser developed around 250 different images of the Colonel before settling on the present one showing the Southern gentleman in an apron as opposed to his starched white suit. The string bow tie remained, but his smile is widened slightly and he appears to be 20 years younger. The end result is a "guy who looks like he invented the brand," not a salesman, Musco says.

Although 250 versions may seem like overkill, Musco said design is a numbers game. The more ideas brought to the table, the more creativity evolves. "First ideas are the ones that are expected," he says. "You need to go deeper."

Research is key when you're trying to unlock the secrets of a brand. While it may seem like an excessive amount of time and money, research is "cheap money," Musco says, "because it lets you know you've covered everything."

"Get it right the first time," he advises. "It's

really expensive to get it wrong." And although do-overs are an option, they're costly in any number of ways.

From Colonel to major rebranding

For Figaro's Pizza, a 101-store pizza chain, Tesser was called in at the beginning of the chain's aggressive growth plans.

"We redid the entire store, from the way the pizza's made (the make line) to the color of the walls," Musco says.

The 25-year-old, Oregon-based chain had just finished working with an ad agency to define the

Tips on working with a redesign

1. Find a design firm that's the right size for your project. You don't want to be their biggest client or their smallest.
2. Look for someone who does work you like.
3. Prepare for sticker shock. Plan to spend more time and more money (about one-and-a-half times more) than you expected.

—Jerry Doty, national director of marketing for Figaro's Pizza, based in Salem, Ore.

brand in words, says Jerry Doty, national director of marketing for Figaro's. Next they needed someone to translate those words and slogans into a concrete vision.

Figaro's management looked at three companies they had identified through recommendations from their ad agency, looking at trade magazines and researching who did the work behind design they liked.

In the end, it was Tesser's work with Quiznos that was the deciding factor. The team at Figaro's had seen the transformation of the Quiznos sandwich shop down the street from them and "loved the look," Doty says.

"Plus they're good people to work for," he says.

Don't underestimate nice. People want to work with people they like. And last, but not least—"they're in the same time zone," Doty says.

The redesign centered around the ad agency's memorable phrase: "Flavors that sing," based on Figaro's radio ads, where their imaginary founder, Figaro sang opera tunes about his love of pizza.

The Tesser design team visited the restaurants, interviewed staff and franchisees and came up with three designs: a warm, sunny Tuscan kitchen; a traditional New York pizza joint with brick and red-and-black accents; and an opera theater look, complete with the heavy red curtains. Half chose the Tuscan look, and half the theater look, Doty says, but it was decided the theater prototype wasn't as practical for build-out.

In addition to a visual makeover, the stores also were re-engineered so the pizzas could be made faster and traffic patterns more streamlined.

The most popular feature was a series of posters illustrated by Marjorie Priceman, an award-winning children's book author, that spoofed famous operas, such as "Romano and Juliet" and "Madame Picked Pie (Madame Butterfly)."

"We liked the posters so much that we had 100 signed (by the artist) and framed for the franchisees' holiday gift," Doty says.

The new prototype has invigorated the brand, Doty says. The last time the stores were updated was in the late '80s. The light wood and pale green palette was on trend at the time, but looks dated today. Plus, the design wasn't tied together well, Doty says, it looked piecemeal.

An added benefit of a well-designed store is that it makes it easier to sell franchises, Musco says. Before the first store with the new prototype was completed in Birmingham, Ala., "franchise

sales (department) was bugging me for examples to show prospects," Doty says.

The new look "fits our brand," Doty says, and it has become a brick-and-mortar advertisement in markets that aren't familiar with the name, Figaro's. "We need the store to do that brand-building work when it goes into a new market," Doty says.

The project wasn't cheap, but it was necessary, he says. A brand should be refreshed about every four to five years, and overhauled once a decade, he explains.

Existing franchisees have not been mandated to switch to the new design, Doty says, however, if they do any kind of remodeling, they have to use the new color scheme. Exactly how Figaro's will implement the new design with franchisees is still being looked at, he says.

It takes a talented team

For Tesser, refreshing and overhauling takes a team that has skills in a number of areas, from architecture to graphic design, marketing to interior design. "We develop a strategy for our clients and then we have to bring it to life," Musco says.

That takes interviews with the principals in the company, including operations, plus reading everything that's been written on the company and the industry.

In Figaro's case, they took the story behind the brand—an opera-singing founder who bumbled most things, but was a genius at making pizzas—and brought it to life through the colors and feel of the store, and in the posters and signage.

If a brand doesn't have a story, they write one.

When asked how they stay creative day in and day out, Musco answers, "Well, we don't rock climb," referring to the trendy, rock-climbing walls some design firms have to encourage creativity.

People with a passion for design never take a vacation from it, according to Musco. And, when they do return from vacations, in addition to the photos of the family and kids, they also have photos of a wall color in Tuscany or a unique fixture or some small treasured item that will inspire future ideas.

"I look for people who would do this on a desert island for no pay," Musco says.

In Musco's world his art director would be the one on the desert island painting palm leaves and his logistics' guy would be organizing the coconuts. [E]



Tre Musco, chief creative officer and founder of Tesser, a brand imaging firm based in San Francisco, is in charge of the company's direction and vision. His firm of creatives "develop the strategy for our clients and then we have to bring it to life."