

# The five fundamentals of great package design

by Mary Zalla  
December 2015



Landor



# The five fundamentals of great package design

By Mary Zalla, Global President, Consumer Brands

With designers being asked to create increasingly innovative and dynamic packaging, a newfound focus on the fundamentals of design and creativity becomes imperative.

Effective packaging is a crucial part of the marketing mix for consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands, and it is becoming only more critical. Your package is an essential aspect of your brand, second only to the product and product experience. So if package design is so important, where do you start? As with all things, you start with the basics. Here are the five fundamentals of great package design that every marketer should consider.

## 1. The importance of insight

Undertaking a package design or redesign program can be a daunting and complex task. There are so many things to consider: the brand's strategic and visual equities, brand architecture and positioning, various consumer segments, retail distribution channels, product integrity, materiality, and more. Where does the design process begin?

The answer: All design begins with insight—the first fundamental.

Insights are foundational. By understanding human emotions, behaviors, and beliefs, especially with regard to individuals or groups of people, good ideas can be accelerated to drive both brand and business value.

Design is an inherently empathetic undertaking in that it is almost always done for someone else. Designers want to understand what people are thinking and feeling, they want to design for others rather than being overly self-absorbed or self-interested. By using insights to drive this empathy, designers can ensure packaging work will speak to the proper audiences.

It's also important to note that statistics and facts are similar to, but not the same as, insights. In today's risk-averse climate, marketers are under pressure to financially



validate any program before it is launched. Because of this, many marketers elevate the importance of statistically viable facts (such as 67 percent of adults indulge in snacks at night) over true insights about their consumers.

It is easy to see the appeal from a marketer's point of view. It feels good to know that 67 percent of adults indulge in snacks in the evening. That one sentence contains information on a segment (adults), a behavior or habit (snacking), and a time of day (night). Even though these few words are chock-full of information, the same words are devoid of insight. Insights are more than observations or statistics. An insight tells us more than just what people do and when they do it—insights get to the heart of *why* they do something.

One of the reasons insights can be so valuable is that they often reveal a hidden truth. For



Staged to look like an American takeover, the Rom redesign of its wrapper from the Romanian flag to the U.S. flag sparked a nationwide debate about what it means to be Romanian. After a week, Rom returned to its original packaging, but its game-changing insight and willingness to brave such an irreverent course resulted in a 79 percent increase in market share.

example: “Adults snack at night to reward themselves after a challenging day—and then they feel guilty about it.”

With this insight, I know not just what adults are doing and when, but also why. And I know how they feel about it. That’s powerful. Now I’ve got true insight into the behavior of my consumers as well as their motivations for the feelings that go alongside the behavior.

Also remember that facts are not unimportant: knowing when people snack could certainly help inform a media buy, as a brand could weight its spots toward evening hours when a larger percentage of adults are susceptible to a message about snacking. This fact, however, is less informative from a design point of view; the insight and its inherent tension will make a far larger impact and can inform the design process.

### As human beings, we share insights

With brands, we very often look for insights that typify one target consumer group, but there are a few fundamental insights that almost all human beings share. An example is the notion that “I can pick on my sibling all day long. But as soon as someone else starts picking on them, we’ve got real problems.”

A few years ago, the successful temporary package redesign and promotional campaign for Rom, a Romanian chocolate bar, tapped into and leveraged this insight perfectly. Before the program’s launch, most Romanians, especially younger Romanians, were not feeling particularly patriotic. This was especially problematic for Rom, whose package design is the Romanian flag. Rom used this insight to not only sell more chocolate bars, but also reignite feelings of patriotism among Romanians.



## Creating insights is a transferable skill

Insight is not only helpful in branding and design, but in life in general. Having insight into something is about understanding people, what makes them tick, their motivations, the whys behind their behavior, and how those whys differ. For instance, as the mother of two sons and one daughter, I know that boys and girls are different: they think differently and they behave differently.

This was never more evident than on a family vacation earlier this summer when my 11-year-old son began to interact and play with another boy his age, while my daughter and I lounged by the side of the pool.

After about two hours of splashing in the water and going down the slide, Elliot ran over to us and with a wide smile said, “Mom, I made a friend in the pool!”

I replied, “I know Elliot, I’ve been watching the two of you play together for a while now.” Elliot smiled at me and then looked fondly toward his new friend, who was waiting for him in the pool. I then said, “By the way, what’s his name?”

Elliot turned back to me and absentmindedly asked, “What?”

I repeated, “What is your new friend’s name?”

Elliot shrugged his shoulders and matter-of-factly stated, “I don’t know.” His little sister and I exchanged a glance, did a bad job of suppressing a perfectly synchronized chuckle, and simultaneously, though good-naturedly, rolled our eyes.

Elliot immediately picked up on all of this, became defensive, squared his shoulders and squeezed his fists, and loudly proclaimed, “Mom! Who cares what his name is? We don’t

talk. We just do stuff!” And he then stormed back into the pool to swim with Friend.

Elliot and Colin (I had to ask his mother his name) continued to have a great time “doing stuff” for the rest of our trip. And this eye-opening encounter reminded me how to better connect with all of my children. My sons Elliot and Lucas and I talk, but it is usually while kicking a soccer ball or tossing a baseball. My daughter Aziza and I talk while we do activities together, but we also just talk.

**Insights enable us to know not just what people are doing and when, but also why.**

So remember: Insights are the first step of the design process

In life as in design, insights are fundamental. Do not start any design process without at least one good insight, and challenge yourself to better connect with the people around you by being more insightful about them.

## 2. Perception is key to interpreting and understanding

The second fundamental of great design is perception. Perception is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression.” Why is perception so important to the business of design? Because great design requires creativity and imagination, and all creativity and imagination begin with perception. Edward Prince said, “Perception lies at the root of all creativity, learning how to see is the start of creativity.”



It's important for designers and marketers to know that what you perceive is more than what your eyes and ears carry to your brain. It's a product of your brain itself. Vision is not the same as perception. Vision is concrete. It observes. Perception is more abstract. Perception leaps beyond observation to judgment. We see what we see, but what we perceive is the joining of what we see with our past experiences and our particular point of view on a situation.

## **Perception and imagination are linked**

According to Gregory Berns who wrote *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently*, perception and imagination are linked because the brain uses the same neural circuits for both functions. Not only that, experience modifies perception because it modifies neural connections. The

more experience we have with something, the more efficient our brains become at processing the information or stimulus. According to Berns:

Neuroscientists have observed that while an entire network of neurons might process a stimulus initially, by about the sixth presentation, the heavy lifting is performed by only a subset of neurons. Because fewer neurons are being used, the network becomes more efficient at carrying out its function.

From the standpoint of the brain, efficiency is a good thing. We are bombarded with so much information, so many stimuli, there is so much competing for our attention, we have to be able to decide what to efficiently process and what to pay a bit more attention to. Our brains naturally decide this for us, and it makes these decisions based on the frequency with which we've experienced the

same thing before. It is why we are able to form whole perceptions from partial images.

Look at the picture at right. What do you see?

Most of you undoubtedly see a horse. And you are right.

But did anybody look at this image and say, “Wow, that’s a two-legged horse!”? I doubt it. Did anybody think, “Why doesn’t that horse have hooves?” or “That is a horse without a mouth!” Again, doubtful. You have seen so many horses and pictures of horses that your brain filled in (perceived) what you did not actually see in the photo. Your brain quickly went to past experience, filled in the hooves and nose and mouth and then determined “This is a horse.”

This mental extrapolation is an important asset in life. Since we are over-served with information we simply cannot ponder each and every thing. But designers and brand stewards must realize that our brains are constantly and efficiently working to fill in missing information. We must realize that this filled-in information is a product of our mind, not necessarily a product of reality.

## **Habit is the enemy of creativity**

So if our brains are incredibly efficient, and they become more efficient the more often they see the same thing, what effect does this have on marketers, designers, and innovators who must create new things, ideas, designs, and opportunities for a brand they may have been working on for the past year, two years, or 10 years? Our brains go on autopilot and we naturally fall into a mode of habitual thinking. This is dangerous because habit is the enemy of creativity.

To achieve great design, we must constantly challenge our perceptions. Yes, we may be looking at the same brand we’ve been



**Vision is not the same as perception. Vision is concrete. It observes. Perception is more abstract. Perception leaps beyond observation to judgment.**



working with for a period of time, but we must be able to see new things. As Proust said, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

When trying to come up with new ideas for an existing problem or opportunity, especially one with which we are very familiar, we must jolt our attentional systems to fight the habitual and the efficient. By consciously creating certain inefficiencies, we create a neural pause button, if you will.

In our business, it’s imperative to be able to see new things in existing landscapes because most of the problems we face are not new. Designers and marketers need to pause, reflect, and consider new ways of thinking about things throughout the stages of their work, seeking new perceptions that they may not have been aware of previously. As Einstein said, “Creativity is seeing what everyone else has seen, and thinking what no one else has thought.”

## **Fresh perspective helps shift the category norm**

This notion undoubtedly fueled our Landor team during the creative development and design of Dead Bolt from Pernod Ricard Winemakers. Dead Bolt was entering a crowded category of brands that often appealed to consumers through sophistication, frequently by creating associations with certain food tastes. We knew Dead Bolt had to be different, so we decided to challenge perceptions around what a fine wine can be. Dead Bolt established itself as a brand that pushes boundaries and breaks all the rules. Through its name, identity, and packaging—complete with a deep matte-black label with a striking high-gloss, foil-stamped tattoo-inspired logo—the brand’s cutting-edge nature is continuously evident.





## Challenging perception leads to game-changing results

The Landor team that designed the award-winning trio of receptacles for the Central Park Conservancy also challenged themselves to think differently as they approached this important project.

Of course the team looked at the current state of trash and recycling bins, but they also considered the project as an audit, not phase one of a design project. To break themselves out of the conventional way of thinking about trash containers, the team got to know the park itself: the grounds, landscape, elevations, structures, and more. Doing this helped the team not only create receptacles that respected and fit into the space, but also helped them create unique and highly-functioning receptacles, inspired by the slats and handrails of a typical Central Park bench.



These new receptacles have resulted in fewer collection vehicles on park paths, and they are nearly impervious to pest infestation. Recycling in the park is up by 35 percent. And, the cans also won one of the first Product Design Lions at Cannes of 2014. Looking at other things in the park, not just the cans, helped our team gain a new perspective by viewing the project from a different angle.

**There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.**

And that is what designers and creators must do. Fight habit. Efficiency is the enemy of creativity. Help inspire original thought by challenging your perceptions, your closely held beliefs and opinions, your standard way of looking at things. Before you allow your brain to make the same old snap judgment, pause and reflect to consider at least one alternative way of viewing it. You will jump-start your imagination and find yourself with more original thoughts, more often.

### **3. Ideas are foundational**

I'll admit that I am a bit of an idea junkie. I don't think there is any better start to a sentence than "I have an idea..." Those four small words, none longer than four letters, hold so much potential and so much promise. And for the business of design, ideas are flat out foundational to what we do.

Once we've gathered the insights and challenged ourselves to think about all aspects of an opportunity, it's time to get going on the ideas that will inspire the design. Too often this idea phase is skipped for a number of reasons. The biggest culprits are:

#### **1. Weak briefs**

We've all seen them, and to be fair to our clients, they have little time or sometimes little experience in writing them. Which is why briefs often end up with objectives such as "contemporize from current," "revitalize graphic system," or "increase traction against appetizing attribute." I'm not saying these are invalid objectives, but you've got a much better chance of both inspiring and selling great work if you ground it in a bigger idea.

#### **2. Devaluation of ideas**

Ideas are plentiful and somewhat easy to come by, so we don't always appropriately value them or consider a broad enough range of them at the outset of a project. Studies in innovation prove the pivotal importance of ideas, especially highlighting that the development of a broader range of ideas is linked to greater in-market successes. "On average, better ideas lead to more successful products. So you need discipline in the idea generation process to come up with really good ideas.... A big mistake companies make in new product invention is that they don't explore broadly enough at the beginning.... Better ideas create better products." (From "Start with the Good Ideas," January 2013 newsletter from *Ideas to Go*.) And the same is true of design: Better ideas produce better design.

#### **3. Timing pressures**

We all know the pace of business is only accelerating. There is less and less time to complete work, and our clients have less and less time to get work into market. The more





time pressure we are under, the more tempted we may be to jump straight to designing. I call this condition “premature execution,” and perhaps one day one of the pharmaceutical companies will devise a drug therapy for this condition. Until then, we must resist the impulse to execute before we have a solid idea. I know it feels counter-intuitive, but the more time we take to innovate sound ideas and territories, the more efficient the rest of the design-generation process will be.

## Ideas inspire and have staying power

Ideas are so central to the human condition. Once an idea is formed, we cannot help but start thinking about how we will act on the idea. Good ideas inspire action and great ideas are catalysts for the design process.

When Landor developed the design for Gevalia as it transitioned from direct-to-consumer to a mass brand, we landed on the central idea of celebrating Gevalia’s Swedish heritage. Not only was this distinctive in the North American coffee category, but the idea sparked an in-depth and fun exploratory of all things Swedish, including color, pattern, texture, and cultural norms. The ultimate design was chosen because it captured modern and traditional elements of Sweden in a powerful way with everything from brand colors informed by the Swedish flag to hand-drawn illustrations inspired by Swedish folk art.

I am not saying that good execution absolutely cannot happen without the basis of a strong idea; sometimes it can. But that work often fails to make it to market because it has a harder time standing up to subjective scrutiny since it’s not grounded in a larger concept.

## Ways to inspire ideas:

- Collaborative work arrangements
- Cross-functional team building
- Pollination across categories
- Respectful rapport
- Active approach to inspiration
- Acknowledgment that great ideas can come from anywhere—and anyone
- Cultures oriented toward learning
- Cultures that promote and celebrate innovation

## Behaviors that tend to suppress ideas:

- Putting people in functional silos
- Appearing to value the ideas from only one group, type of person, or function
- The stigmatization of failure
- Snap judgment on an idea's merit
- Rigid management structure and style
- Elevation of the status quo

## Ideas can be inspired or suppressed

Environments, culture, and leadership can inspire the lateral, unfettered exploration of ideas, or they can severely hinder or suppress the development of new ideas. And as much as I love ideas, let's be clear—they have their place. For instance, if I'm flying cross-country and my pilot suddenly says to her copilot, "Hey, I have an idea. Let's see what happens when we experiment with cabin pressure" or "I have an idea, let's try and land this thing without using our instrument panel"—these examples illustrate an improper time and place for a fresh idea.

In design environments, however, ideas are almost always valuable. In fact, Sir Ken Robinson's definition of creativity is "original ideas that have value." And we can create the necessary conditions for our coworkers to feel very comfortable sharing their thoughts.

## 4. Story—key to the human condition

Stories play a fundamental role in almost every aspect of human life. We use stories to record history and events, to share information, to teach, to remember, to entertain, to warn, and on and on. Every human civilization has used story in one way or another. Author Ursula K. Le Guin said: "The story—from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace—is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."

## Challenge perceptions

Stories are so important because they are often the vehicles through which we share ideas. Once you have an idea, a great story



can help put flesh on the bones and deliver your idea with the appropriate context and emotional punch. Human beings are drawn to stories—stories have the power to persuade people to adopt a different point of view or inspire them to take action.

Consider the work by creative agency AIS London for Harrison’s Fund, an organization that raises money to help fight Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a disease for which there is not only no cure, but no treatment. AIS told a powerful story using only six words: I wish my son had cancer. This incredibly short story perfectly and poignantly challenges a parent’s belief that a cancer diagnosis is the worst thing that can happen to their child. The copy goes on to inspire readers to take action to try and make a difference.

## Design that tells a new story

Stories are especially powerful in design for many reasons, one being that stories serve as the link between our ideas and design. Design is disciplined innovation, so by its very definition, design always seeks to be original. While designers value originality, and while original ideas can drive a distinctive position in the marketplace, it is also true that we are often designing for very familiar products and categories. So the challenge is often how to use design to drive reconsideration of something very familiar or reignite interest by telling a new story about something consumers think they already know.

Consumers have come to consider wines through characteristics such as type of grape, vintage, or region. Brancott Estates’ claim to fame is that all its grapes are from very specific “chosen rows.” The brand’s story claims the best fruit comes from rows planted north to south in order to capture the best light. Landor told that tale with a 3-D label with die cut and embossed vines that cast a shadow as the light changes. The label





tells an entire story in one simple, yet communicative, piece of design.

## Facts and stories

So often in business settings we trade in facts. We behave rationally (we think). We are data-backed, statistically rich, and highly credible. We think this is effective because we are usually talking to other intelligent, rational, credible businesspeople. But in many cases, we aren't as persuasive or as compelling as we might like. And it's not because our facts are bad. It's because as Roger Schank, artificial intelligence theorist, cognitive psychologist, and former Northwestern University professor said: "Human beings are not ideally set up to understand logic; they are ideally set up to understand stories."

Perhaps that is the reason we often hear politicians cite percentages and statistics

very quickly, but then spend time telling anecdotal stories that put contextual flesh on the bare facts. People respond to stories. Many stories are internalized and remembered, and can be recalled again and again, while even some of the smartest among us lose track of exact facts and figures. It's the human condition. Why fight it? Use story to your advantage.

We took this to heart when creating the new packaging for Oscar Mayer's Butcher Thick Cut Bacon. As you can see, the category was in lockstep from both a graphical and structural standpoint.

We could have created a design that followed these conventions and used the facts about the unique product to gain traction with consumers. But rather than a claim about this bacon being 17 percent thicker than the competition, or two times fresher than ordinary bacon, we let the design tell the story. Using the back panel as the front,

a paper substrate, and precision-crafted type, we transported consumers to the experience of a traditional, credentialed, and fresh butcher shop. Rather than assault them with facts and figures about the product, we created a design that told a story about where the best meats originate.

Stories are powerful. Whether you use them to help sell your design solution to your clients, inform your design, or tell a story through the graphic system, stories are an effective tool in any designer's arsenal. Stories—pass one on today.

## 5. Courage and creativity go hand in hand

Unlike the first four fundamentals of great design, the fifth fundamental is not a capacity or a skill, but a virtue. And that virtue is courage. Courage is actually a cardinal virtue, meaning that other virtues hinge on it.

Courage goes hand in hand with creativity. In fact, I believe that courage and creativity are brothers, which is a notion I put forth in the *Eight Principles of Creativity*. Why is courage so essential to creativity and design? Because history proves that new ideas and concepts are often met with apathy, ridicule, or even hostility. And this hostility is often directed at the creators of original ideas and design. Which is why creativity values imagination over image, and a willingness to let go of certainties and think expansively; it also demands a strong dose of determination and self-belief. This is why courage and creativity must go together.

### Courage leads to breakthrough

Courage is necessary at every stage of a design project. It is often most needed

to confront brutal facts in complex situations. Sometimes you need courage to advocate for the optimal approach to a design project. Other times it's about clients displaying courage by investing and believing in a new approach.

Consider Capri Sun, a popular and successful brand of pouched juice drinks. The brand had always been targeted at 10-year-old boys and positioned as a beverage that drew its credibility from Southern California. Over time, however, the design had become very flat, using only the most banal, pedestrian images of the region. To become relevant again, Capri Sun returned to the roots of its brand: a healthy drink for kids with SoCal cool. Both of these things drove Landor's exploration and inspiration for the final design.

**People respond to stories. Stories are internalized and remembered, recalled again and again.**

The designers convinced the client that the positioning was spot-on but the design was uninspiring. We took a trip to Southern California for design inspiration. While the trip might seem like a big boondoggle, during our time there we immersed ourselves in all things Southern California and came back with valuable insights and visual inspiration. This informed a very healthy and productive design exploration that made the existing design look like a preschool version of what was to come.

“The Pacific Ocean does not have a kiddie section” was the mantra that kept the design team focused on the edgier aspects of the region. That sentiment ultimately led to

a successful in-market design. Very often it is courage that defines the difference between good design and great design.

Of course an important part of courage is fear. That may seem counterintuitive, but as Mark Twain said, “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear.”

Or from William Ian Miller: “[Courage] is not fearlessness, recklessness, or rashness. It is a well-considered, wise, and brave decision

enough to prove a great hindrance to innovation. The inability to tame the stress response therefore is a major design (innovation) inhibitor. Why? Because fear can paralyze action, inhibiting new thinking and how people respond to new thinking.

If fear permeates an organization’s culture, organic growth is nearly impossible. Fearful organizations tend to stagnate or drive growth only through the acquisition of other’s inventions.

Author Anaïs Nin once said, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

## Display courage in pursuit of great design

It is the natural human response to fear that often keeps us from making the bold moves necessary for a brand to break out and succeed. To paraphrase Steve Denning in “Telling Tales,” in a fear-based context decision makers display a strong bias toward alternatives that perpetuate the status quo.

There are many ways to overcome the effects of fear. In business we often confront the irrational with reason or a sound argument. Other times we use facts and statistics to make our case. Research is often commissioned to help prove the validity of a concept. An often-overlooked way to overcome fear is simply through time.

When we are first exposed to something highly novel and unexpected, our initial response is often dread. This is called the amygdala response, amygdala being the name for a set of neurons located deep in the brain’s medial temporal lobe. This subcortical brain structure is linked to fear responses (and, interestingly, also to responses of pleasure). The point is, what is often perceived as scary at first becomes more acceptable over time. So give people a sufficient period to warm up to things.

**Think of fear like alcohol. It impairs judgment. Don’t make any decisions while under its influence.**

to behave constructively despite the fear, discomfort, or temptation.... It is the discipline to act on wisely-chosen values rather than an impulse.”

It is important to understand fear and the human response to fear, especially if you are in a business that requires the constant application of originality and innovation to succeed. And make no mistake—if you are in the design business, you are part of this type of industry.

In *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step*, Edward de Bono writes, “There is a fear/stress response innate in all of us, and it usually serves us quite well. Millions of years of evolution have produced a very active stress system that can actually override every other system in the brain.”

It is important to understand that the stress system is not rational. It is by its very definition irrational; it is physiological. The stress system reacts to provocation, and that reaction is often very powerful—powerful





Don't demand approval on the spot. Allow your clients time to work through their natural fear response. Don't fight physiology. Display patience in the face of fear. Do as noted author and neuroscientist Gregory Berns advises in *Iconoclast*: "Think of fear like alcohol. It impairs judgment. Don't make any decisions while under its influence."

KFC Australia and Ogilvy Sydney showed great courage, even with one of design's most protected assets, equity color. In an effort to drive brand participation during the cricket Ashes series, KFC changed its equity colors from red and white to Australia's green and gold to support the Australian cricket team. Its courage paid dividends—sales increased by 178 percent and KFC sold out of all 330,000 green-and-gold chicken buckets.

Display courage in the pursuit of great design. Great design matters. It creates competitive advantage, drives commerce, and can improve people's lives and experiences. That does not mean to have no fear, or to belittle the fear of

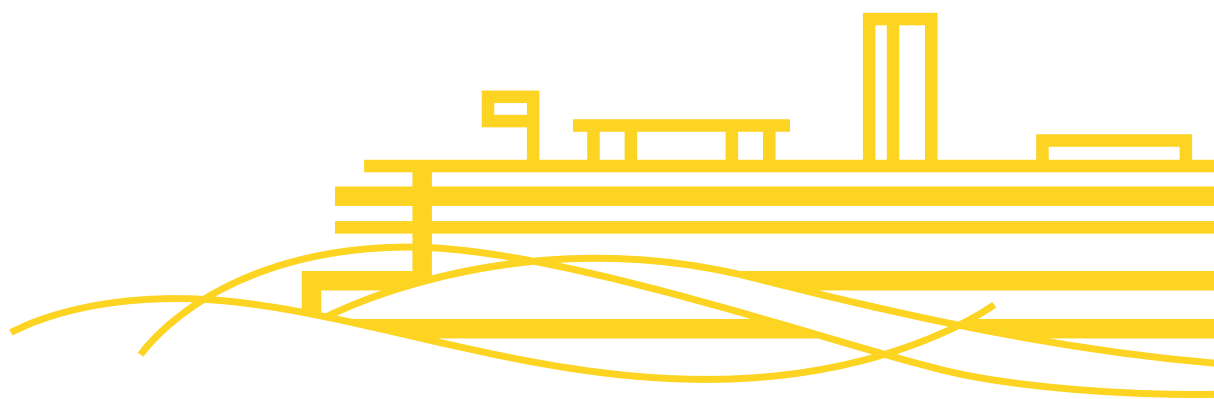
others during the process. It does mean that the benefits of great design are worth working through those fears, overcoming them, and putting a great product out into the world.

Courage is the strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, dread, or difficulty. Strong design necessitates bold exploration of new territories paired with perseverance and a willingness and ability to overcome difficulty. Design is often a long game: resolute endurance, the very definition of fortitude, is key to success. And fortitude is often used synonymously with courage. That is no accident.

Creating distinctive, innovative, and engaging packaging can be a complex and sometimes daunting undertaking. Focus on the fundamentals: insight, perception, ideas, story, and courage. You'll understand your brand better than ever and be well on your way to creating stunning design that will resonate with consumers and keep them coming back for more. ■

Landor.com  
hello@landor.com

Bangkok  
Beijing  
Cape Town  
Chicago  
Cincinnati  
Dubai  
Geneva  
Hamburg  
Hong Kong  
Istanbul  
Jakarta  
Kuala Lumpur  
London  
Melbourne  
Mexico City  
Milan  
Moscow  
Mumbai  
New York  
Paris  
San Francisco  
São Paulo  
Seoul  
Shanghai  
Singapore  
Sydney  
Tokyo



**Landor**