

This agency helps retailers, licensors, and licensees discover the creative and financial benefits of brand licensing.



As the world continues to shrink from a business perspective, many retailers have had to change their strategies to find a competitive advantage. Companies are realizing that the biggest asset they have is not their manufacturing process, their formulation, or their distribution practices. It's the value of their brand.

This might be news to many retailers, but since founding their company 28 years ago, the team of Meyer and Carol Janet has understood this principle. And they built a reputation with their agency, [Design Plus](#), based on their creative approach to licensing strong brands.

"We got involved in the licensing industry by understanding what brand is about, the value of brand, and what brand represents to consumers," said Meyer Janet, president. "We make it a point to understand the emotional hot buttons that could translate a brand into merchandise, either as an extension of the brand or as a lifestyle connotation to enhance brand loyalty."

Measuring passion

Meyer and Carol select the companies they work with based on the level of passion and excitement the brand generates with the client and themselves. As a former CFO for one of the largest retailers in South Africa—where the Janets call home—Meyer understands that the merchandise needs to move itself off the shelf.



"If we can't get excited about a brand, we leave it," he said. "That excitement needs to translate into merchandise because the retailer needs it to have legs." Perfect examples are the ICEE and Slush Puppie brands with their distinct flavor profiles and sense of fun. They are both youth-oriented brands with nostalgic and trend appeal.

The head of the creative side of the business, Carol works closely with the licensee, licensor,

and retailer when embarking on a project. With its years of experience, Design Plus plays a significant role in product development, taking the creative responsibility out of the hands of corporations and putting it into the hands of artistic minds.

“We know the retailer has the best feel for what the consumer wants, which demographic purchases the product, and who takes up space in the store, so the look and feel of the product is important,” said Carol, CEO. “We work with our licensor, taking every bit of lifestyle from the brand, translating it creatively to give it what the licensee or manufacturer wants, and turning it into a product that speaks the brand.”

Meyer said licensors that are new to licensing often have creative divisions within their companies, but those divisions don't have experience with direct-to-retail projects. “We fill that gap because we are closely related to retail. Our starting point in any licensing program, whether in the development of product or a program, is how it sits with retail.”

Creative guidelines

A new development in the licensing world is resurrecting brands that at one time had significant equity capital. Brands for companies such as Linens & Things and Sharper Image, both of which declared bankruptcy, have recently been invested in and relaunched as purely Internet vehicles or licensed catalogue operations.

In retail, nostalgia and vintage art have become very popular, especially with mass, specialty, and independent retailers and c-stores. For these reasons, Design Plus develops style guides for each of its clients to ensure a brand image is always streamlined so that no matter which licensee develops a product, the brand never loses its signature style.

“When a manufacturer or licensee puts a range of product together, whether it be a T-shirt or ice cream, s/he doesn't have to keep wondering if it's right or if it's the look,” said Carol. “It cuts down on the time involved in the approval process, and it gives licensees a greater sense of comfort that they will do a better job.”



Once a client has signed on with Design Plus, Carol visits the client's archives, its creative team, and its ad agency and pulls out as much archival creative material as possible. She then combines the materials; translates them into various product categories; creates borders, icons, backgrounds, etc.; and develops the legal parameters the brand requires around its trademark.

“This approach benefits the licensors at retail because the products all look homogenous,” said Meyer. “It promotes the store-within-a-store type of appearance at retail because you can cross-merchandise products and have a cumulative attractiveness with the brand.”

Redheaded stepchild

Design Plus moved into the US market in 1994 after it signed on to assist in the development of the merchandising mix for Coca-Cola for the Olympic games in Atlanta. The company still has offices in South Africa and associates located in Europe and Asia.

Although the Coca-Cola relationship opened many doors for the company, Carol believes it was the “Yo Quiero Taco Bell” project that really put Design Plus on the map. “We weren’t the agent, but we were called in to help merchandise and develop the creative platform because there was no differentiation in the merchandise,” she explained.

At first, retailers wanting to develop merchandise for Taco Bell were only given images of the Chihuahua, the phrase “Yo Quiero Taco Bell,” and the Taco Bell logo. With a reputation of differentiating merchandise at retail, Carol and her team created a few looks for Taco Bell that spoke to consumers while also creating excitement at the retail level for the brand owner.

“Our unique approach of differentiating brands through licensing earned us points in the industry,” Carol said. “We also gained a solid reputation because when you call our agency, you’re always dealing with the principals.”

The licensing industry as a whole hasn’t grown dramatically since the Janets first moved into the US market, but its importance has. Shows such as the Licensing International Expo are opening the eyes of many retailers looking for new revenue streams.

“People in marketing departments spend millions and billions on advertising campaigns that don’t work or, at best, might garner them a creative award,” said Meyer. “For many years, licensing was the redheaded stepchild of the marketing mix, but that’s starting to change.”

Licensing programs garner royalties, protect brands from contraband merchandise, and promote a company’s image, but Carol said many marketing departments still don’t get it. “When we started in the US, retailers weren’t really part of the licensing mix. It was very strange to us because in the UK, we did a lot of licensing direct-to-retail,” she said.

“Now, retailers, especially mass merchandisers, are ready to get behind our programs and work with us because once you have established a program successfully, it becomes like an annuity.”