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ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design
Management
Review**

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Reprint #06174BR018

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 17 No. 4

Leadership Strategies in Design Management

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Building Brands: A Shift in Strategy for Cascade Designs

by Liz Brown and Eric Park

In interviews with executives and managers responsible for implementing brand and design, Liz Brown and Eric Park elicit how this performance outdoor equipment company has integrated and fine-tuned several important branding tools to generate a fuller understanding of its products, distinguish various consumer categories, and sharpen its brand message—a process that is helping to make it into a marketplace leader.



Over the past 30 years, Mountain Safety Research (MSR) has earned an enviable reputation as a manufacturer of exceptional high-performance backcountry gear. However, recent and rapid maturation of the outdoor market—characterized by consolidation throughout the supply chain, declining margins, shortened product lifecycles, reduced profitability, increased private labeling, and battles over market share—required a shift in MSR's strategy. MSR needed to understand the way in which branding could best represent its products.

In 2001, MSR was acquired by Cascade Designs, Inc., a mid-cap manufacturer of performance outdoor equip-



Liz Brown, Writer, Ziba



Eric Park, Creative Director, Ziba

ment in business for more than 30 years. Two years later, Cascade Designs asked Ziba to help define a new line of outdoor stove products for MSR, including a visual brand language (VBL) that could be extended to other product categories. The timing couldn't have been better. The MSR acquisition had added several new product lines under the MSR brand, and the company's brand management team, led by Carol Blayden, knew that change was necessary. Working with Cascade Designs was a timely and exciting opportunity for Ziba, as well. We had already helped many larger Fortune 500 companies manage and develop more-

meaningful innovation. In this case, it was rewarding to support a company like Cascade Designs, whose respected brands are well-known among the many outdoor enthusiasts at Ziba. The project presented an opportunity to combine two loves: branded product design and the outdoors.

To help Cascade Designs leverage the equity of its MSR camp-stove brand, we introduced our proprietary branded-product approach, which we call ViBE (Visual and Interactive Brand Equity). ViBE translates brand attributes into dimensional product experiences. It starts by defining the essence, values, and character of a brand—its DNA—and extends that into messages, themes, and physical attributes. The resulting design language includes visual and experiential principles and signature elements that make a brand tangible. The principles guide design and can transcend any particular media. Signature elements are groups of stable articulations of design principles that communicate brand personality and design principles through form, texture, badging, and surface and interaction details—how a button is designed, for example, or specific finish elements.

To ensure relevance, ViBE relies on a deep understanding of a brand's strategic target customer and uses character archetypes to provide a framework for telling stories. Archetypes personify and reflect the culture of a company. They also help create more-meaningful experiences for customers that extend throughout marketing materials, products, and services.

BrandFrame is the articulation of a brand's DNA and how it translates into myths, metaphors, and themes that people experience. A BrandFrame is always developed in the context of creating something larger—an “experience architecture” or visual brand language, for example. VBL is the goal of the ViBE process, and creating a BrandFrame is one of the necessary steps to achieve it.

In addition to helping companies craft a more consistent, authentic, and meaningful experience for customers, VBL serves as a visual reference tool for teams within the company across diverse departments, from product design to marketing. When questions arise about whether something is on-brand, VBL guidelines

help determine the answer in a nonpersonal, clearly defined way.

Cascade Designs has used the MSR VBL and BrandFrame to help guide subsequent product design, packaging, and marketing communications. Based on the successful implementation of these foundational tools, the brand marketing team and lead designers at Cascade Designs developed VBLs and BrandFrames across their entire portfolio of outdoor brands, with impressive results. Using these tools, the company has expanded into new markets and experienced significant growth in market share across multiple outdoor categories in the last two years. We spoke with members of these teams to learn more about how VBL and BrandFrame have affected business strategy, company culture, and success.

An interview with Jon Almquist, MSR global brand manager; Grant Lange, senior industrial designer; and Matt Delcomyn, creative services manager

What were your impressions of Ziba before we began working with Cascade Designs? Initial thoughts?

Lange: I've always thought of Ziba Design as one of the more forward-thinking product design firms out there. I came to realize they're far more involved in design strategy and design management, as well.

Delcomyn: I was brought in when Carol [Blayden, director of marketing] and Eric [Park, Ziba's creative director] were talking about the BrandFrame template and brand archetypes. That approach was fresh and a little radical and felt intuitively on track.

Looking back on 2003 to 2004, how did the BrandFrame and VBL documents for MSR inform your creative direction of product, packaging, and marketing collateral for the brand?

Lange: Ziba brought us a process of thinking creatively about product development. The process wasn't rigid, but it did insist on getting everyone in the room and sorting things out quickly. The BrandFrame and VBL got

two creative departments and marketing to the point where they were all speaking the same language and using the same tool set.

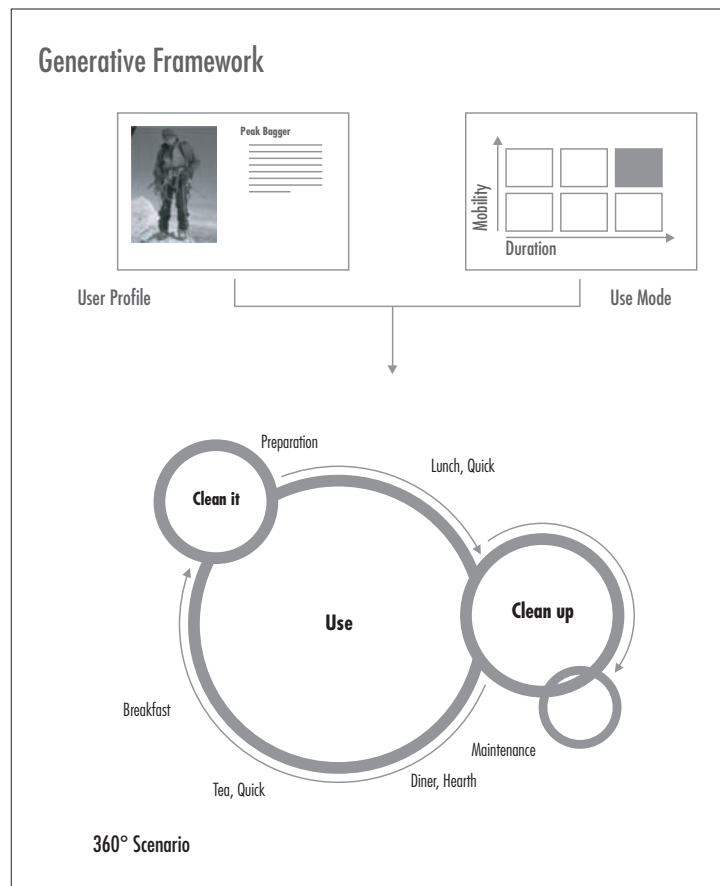
Almquist: Ziba’s tools brought us a consumer-centric method and an organized process. As a forward-thinking but technological company, we had been creating consumer-facing stories based on the technology of the product rather than the solutions it provided the consumer.

How did these tools for MSR make your work better?

Almquist: They provided a template to help us internalize what we already knew, and helped make sure we were all using the same language. You can see the results on the new MSR packaging and recent MSR products, such as the new stoves (see photo at right).

Lange: The VBL helped the product design team by giving resolution to what we were doing instinctually. Before, although the product designers could walk up to a product design and say, “Yes, this is an MSR design,” or, “No, this isn’t one of ours,” they couldn’t explain to somebody outside the design community why that mattered. The VBL document gives us a way to walk them through it and say, “This is why we’re making these visual design choices.”

Delcomyn: In the past, a lot of times the person with the longest exposure to the brand carried the most weight in a discussion about what was true to the brand. The BrandFrame allowed us to give everyone a voice, but it acted as a filter to quickly find the most on-brand, strategic ideas.



The Generative Framework represents the initial methodology between user profiles and use modes to generate a series of potential product stories. In this case, the framework was based on a matrix of target user profiles and outdoor activity modes. Each intersection creates the seed for a unique use scenario, which becomes the inspiration for new product ideas. This map provides a level of context in which opportunities to improve the experience through new product ideas can be identified.

How have BrandFrame and VBL documents for MSR and other Cascade Designs brands affected photography, package design, and copy?

Delcomyn: I'm the photo buyer and I create a set of photo guidelines from the BrandFrame, spelling out some of the brand and incorporating archetypes. I compile that into a storytelling outline about what the photo style for each brand should be, and that becomes a document I give to all the photographers. We're getting the best photographers in the industry coming to us now.

In terms of packaging and collateral, we use the combination of BrandFrame and VBL we've created as documents, bringing them into high-profile meetings. They help us filter ideas, enabling us to find the solution that's most on-brand.

How do these tools affect copy and layout?

Delcomyn: Our in-house copywriter has been working on these brands the last couple years. With these BrandFrames, he's been able to accentuate their characteristics and create a useful set of distinctions between each brand.



The XGK EX stove was the first stove put into production that utilized the new concepts of generative framework and VBL for the MSR brand. Initial results indicate that it resonates well with expected users and strongly speaks to their expectations from MSR.

Segmentation Detail			
	<p>Extreme & Essential</p>	<p>Fast & Light</p>	<p>Camp & Comfort</p>
Overall Goal	<i>Challenge nature</i>	<i>Challenge myself in nature</i>	<i>Enjoy nature</i>
Attitude	<i>Eat to live</i>	<i>Eat to live/Live to eat</i>	<i>Live to eat</i>
Conditions	<i>All weather</i>	<i>Mixed weather</i>	<i>Fair weather</i>
Altitude	<i>Up to 25,000 ft.</i>	<i>Up to 10,000 ft.</i>	<i>< 5,000 ft.</i>
Temperature	<i>All temperatures</i>	<i>> 20°</i>	<i>> 50°</i>

Segmentation identifies a clear opportunity to develop product lines based on consumer attributes and other variables. Traditionally, climate and altitude have been the primary differentiators between various types of camp stoves, and the market was segmented based on technology rather than user needs. We developed a segmentation that blended user attitudes toward outdoor experience with functional requirements based on use/environment conditions. As seen in the opportunity frame, this provides a clear basis for knowing which existing products should remain and which new products should be developed.

What about the VBL documents?

Lange: Right now we have two VBLs built. They're up on the walls in several places in the office. When we have arguments about design, we walk over to the VBL document and talk about it. It really takes the argument away from what I think is cool and what Jon thinks is cool to, "What is MSR?"

Can you cite any tangible measures of success since you began using these tools?

Lange: Working with Ziba on the BrandFrame and the VBL for MSR, we understood the language and the process, and we're doing the same thing with the rest of our brands. Every time we've done a brand revamp using strategy with the BrandFrame and VBL, we've seen market improvements in overall impression of the brand.

Almquist: The stove packaging is a fantastic example of where the extra work, guided by Ziba's ability to help us document what we are and what we already do, helped create open communication with a different language. [Note: The box shape and package imagery were informed by design principles and signature elements illustrated in the VBL.] The first year for the new MSR brand look and feel was 2005. Stoves were the first category to be affected, including new pack-

aging and collateral pieces. Our sales numbers indicate that sales of the whole line of MSR stoves grew significantly.

Is there anything you'd like to add about how you use BrandFrame today?

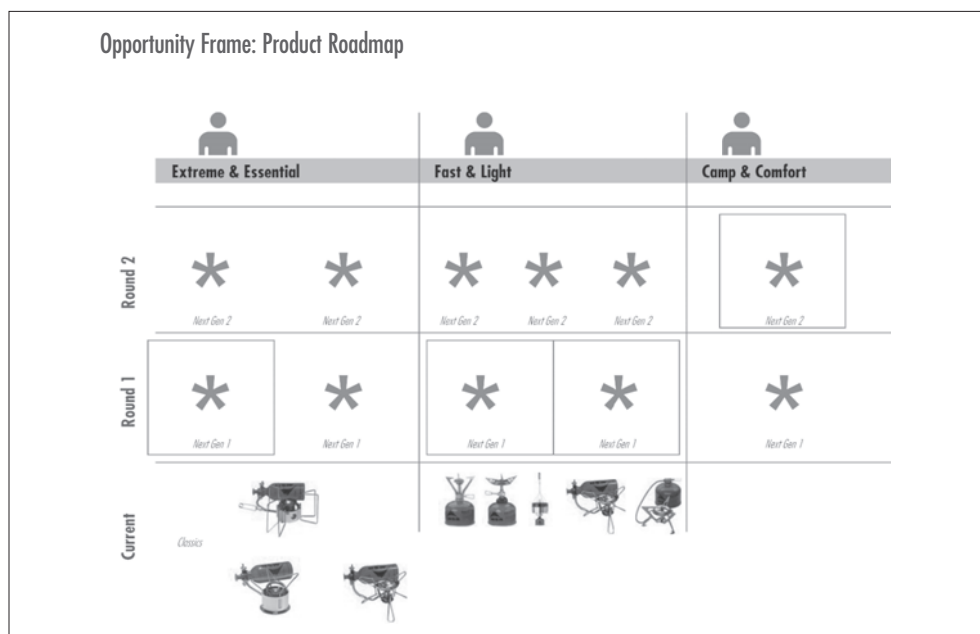
Delcomyn: One of the more successful models for corporate marketing today might be what we have—a core in-house marketing team that drives the look and feel of the brand, with the occasional use of outside partnerships and collaboration. Every time I've given out a creative brief combined with BrandFrame, collaborators are enthusiastic about it. It's a really wonderful tool for them.

And how have you evolved it to other brands?

Delcomyn: Once we refined the original template and built the first BrandFrame, subsequent BrandFrames became easier to create.

Is there anything you'd like to add about what works and doesn't work?

Delcomyn: This structure will help us clarify how the brands might express themselves in next-generation marketing materials at point of sale, online, and at events. What they don't do is generate executable answers to these questions—that's where our team's talent comes in.



The Opportunity Frame serves as a product road map that offers recommendations for repositioning existing products based on new user segmentation.