Keep Calm And Carry On Or Shoppers Of The World Unite:

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Consumer Enthusiasm for the Propaganda Sell

MallEscalators Twentieth century propaganda imagery may be seen as the ultimate in â€œhard sellâ€• advertising but itâ€™s inspiring marketers, and businesses are incorporating its directness of approach and simplicity of design into their product packaging and promotions, while at the same time including modern touches that will appeal to todayâ€™s consumer.

Key trends
- War games;
- Empowered women;
- Propaganda pitfalls.

Commercial opportunities
- Value-conscious consumers;
- Feisty women;
- Sophisticated shoppers.

Background
â€œYour brand needs youâ€• doesnâ€™t have quite the same resonance as â€œYour country needs youâ€• but advertisers se borrowing from Soviet era and war years propaganda imagery to connect with consumers.Â In times of austerity people tend to look to a sepia-toned past, to a seeming golden era, so it might appear counter-intuitive to seek to evoke a bleak period in history.Â But what advertisers seem to be tapping into here is an identification with a previous period of adversity when people pulled through by working together. Â

The propaganda posters from that era embody optimism, just whatâ€™s needed to get consumers out to the shops in force.Â In the UK the conservative government has picked up on this theme with its slogan, â€œweâ€™re all in this together,â€• which echoes Barack Obamaâ€™s mantra, â€œyes we can.â€• The UKâ€™s Ministry of Defence, meanwhile, has issued â€œCarele livesâ€• â€“ style public information videos on YouTube warning servicemen and their families of the risks in using social networking sites.

The communal theme is taken up in the packaging of businesses such as the Shirah Wine Company, a small California-based winery that produces exclusive kosher wines.Â The producers were looking for a brand design that evoked authority with elegance to reflect the complex character of its 2009 Syrah.

Miller Creative came up with â€˜Power to the People,â€™ a design that captures the essence of old propaganda posters, with Soviet-style typography where most of the text is in bold capital letters. Sunrays emanate from the centre, which features a large fist crushing grapes in its vigorous grip. Â

The simplicity and directness of propaganda imagery also suggests value and solid quality, and seems part of a wider trend towards less fussy packaging and advertising.Â In May, the Wall Street Journal reported a U-turn by major companies away from labels cluttered with specific claims like â€œeasy pour spoutâ€• or â€œbetter tastingâ€• to packaging that punch and plays on the emotions.

Over time, it explained, labels became busier because computers could allow for complex designs, and marketers wanted products to stand out on crowded shelves.

Ad agencies, meanwhile, are having a ball with anachronistic aspects of this trend. 1950s-style retro social media ads involving sites including Facebook, YouTube, Skype and Twitter, for instance, are a thought-provoking concept from Moma Propaganda in Brazil and the international 6B Studio. A recent ad focuses on Twitter and is titled â€œThe sublime, mighty community with just 140 characters.â€•

War games
Wartime propaganda imagery has also been used to sell one of the most modern of phenomenon, video games.Â Dino D-Day, launched in April, is a game for PCs that allows players to take on the forces of the Third Reich, who are armed with a weapon of mass destruction: resurrected dinosaurs. To help promote the game, the developers created a parody series of 1940s propaganda posters that encourage soldiers to fight against Hitler and his Jurassic storm troopers.

Itâ€™s a theme that has been extended to limited edition Star War posters, a must-have for sci-fi fans.Â In a twist on Americaâ€™s classic propaganda posters of the war years, one encourages fans to enlist today as Darth Vader is unable to

win the battle on his own, and the empire needs them. Another poster features three light-sabers emitting vibrant neon lights, epically titled â€˜Togetherâ€™.Â In both cases propaganda imagery is reinvented for a modern age, and sophisticated audience, by the introduction of humour.

Empowered women

In the UK a number of major companies have jumped on the nostalgia bandwagon, and adopted the iconography of the war years. M&S, Persil, Virgin, Hovis, Milky Way and John Lewis have all used campaigns recently that hark back to their past.Â According to redcmarketingcom, the rationale for this drive down memory lane is that during times of financial hardship, customers look to trusted names that are tried and tested rather than experiment with the unknown.Â Â

In 2009 Hovis, the baking company, won the British Television Awards â€˜Commercial of the Yearâ€™ for their advert, which told the story of a young boy travelling through time charting Britainâ€™s turbulent history over the past 122 years, including the First and Second World Wars. Â

The commercial worked, argues redcmarketing, because it moved viewers by references to some of Britainâ€™s most devastating and tragic events, however, the overriding feeling they received from the advert was one of reassurance: that a credit crisis should be a piece of cake for a business that had managed to continue trading through two world wars.

A similar approach was taken by the supermarket chain Sainsburyâ€™s, whose adverts chronicled the firmâ€™s history of fema employment, and celebrated how they helped with the war effort by halving their labels to help save resources.

The empowered woman also features in the packaging of Norwegian muesli company Vilje. The graphic design of the recycled boxes and wrappers recalls simpler times when labelling was direct and to the point. Resembling 1940s propaganda posters, the packaging is aimed at a contemporary consumer base of empowered women between the ages of 25 and 40 years old. The female cartoon characters who take centre stage on the packets display their biceps with pride, and command the shopperâ€™s attention with their steadfast gaze.

Sakes Fifth Avenue, that bastion of capitalism, also picked up on Soviet era iconography, and the familiar image of the powerful female worker, to sell its â€œslouch bagâ€• and other wares to the masses, or at least to those among them with the cash to spare on deluxe goods, in 2009.Â The designs, by Shepard Fairey, captured the bold Constructivist style of Rodchenko in the 1920s, and paid homage to advertisements from 1925 used by the state-run Mosselprom department chain. Â

â€œWhat we do every day, really, is propaganda,â€œ the senior vice-president for marketing at Saks told the New York Post, â why not go the whole hog?â€•Â The imagery was simple but dramatic, a style reminiscent of the social realism of Soviet propaganda from the 1920s and 1930s.Â The Saks slogan, â€œWant IT!â€• was printed in lettering similar to the graphic desig of Rodchenko, with images of models posing as if they were champions of workersâ€™ rights.Â Another ad featured a model wearing a pair of cropped shorts, described as â€œBrave Pants.â€• Â

Mr Fairey told the New York Post that his designs, which Saks commissioned with the aim of getting customers buying again in the midst of a recession, were inspired in part by agitprop posters made for the Works Progress Administration in the 1940s to lift morale.

Propaganda pitfalls

Experts seem agreed that in a time of anxiety people seek out brands they feel comfortable with and can trust.Â However, there are possible pitfalls with any advertising based on a reference to the past.

Particularly for young consumers, they can be negative associations, evoking a belief that the brand or product is old-fashioned, out-dated and therefore not for them. To avoid this risk, companies need to give a modern twist to an old theme.Â So when US clothing company Cotton Inc. reintroduced a jingle from a decades-old commercial it made it relevant to a new audience by using contemporary musicians to perform the song.

Straight nostalgia, or propaganda imagery, doesnâ€™t always work.Â To connect with young audiences it has to be done with wit and style, and include modern references.Â Kraft Foods Inc. produced a retro look for the 2009 redesign of its Miracle Whip brand, incorporating elements of the brandâ€™s original label from 1933.

At the time, in the midst of recession, there was a desire to â€œcelebrate the past and push toward our future,â€• the director of design and innovations for Kraft told the New York Times.Â But the feedback from focus groups was that younger customers werenâ€™t impressed.Â So in 2010 the company added zap with the addition of a flashy â€œMWâ€• swoosh logo. I hindsight, the retro look may work better for a brand that isnâ€™t hoping to draw the attention of young adults directly, the Kraft spokeswoman said. Â

However, another take on it, as expressed to the Wall Street Journal by a senior marketing director at PepsiCo, is that

young people look at vintage designs, such as the Throwback Pepsi can, which referenced can designs from the 70s, and think, â€œIt is authentic to history and the past and has an almost timeless element.â€•Â Propaganda imagery also has the advantage, when presented ironically, that it can appeal to a young audience that can be put off by the twee feel of the nostalgia pitch.

Outlook
Propaganda imagery appears to be enjoying a renaissance at the moment, and its classic designs will always appeal to some.Â However, once the global economy emerges fully from recession itâ€™s likely that shoppers will want to see advertising thatâ€™s more firmly rooted in the present, and more unashamedly focused on aspiration and living the consumer dream.

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