

Trends in Label Design: Communicating Your Brand Image

Designers encourage wineries to create a label that provokes some emotional attachment.

Michael S. Lasky

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ASK ANY NUMBER OF label designers what the latest trends in wine label design are and you'll get an equal number of varying answers—and then one they all agree on: The best labels today convey your winery's story and brand.

When updating an existing package or creating an entirely new image, the designers **WBM** talked with encourage their winery clients to engage consumers with packaging—labels, capsules and even stock bottles—that provokes some emotional attachment. If the saying “A picture speaks a thousand words” is indeed true, it's the label that's doing the talking.

There is a problem, however. The message conveyed by labels is interpreted differently, depending upon who is looking at it. With that in mind, it's important to design a label that appeals to a core audience while inviting new drinkers in, tells your brand's story and is eye-catching, all while holding onto the winery's values and remaining in budget.

WBM spoke with several designers to discuss the latest trends and best practices in label design.

How to Speak Millennial Without Ignoring Legacy Consumers

Historically, wine has been marketed to an older demographic, who generally made wine-purchasing decisions based on producers' reputations, scores or a desire to show social status.

Conversely, Millennials couldn't care less about the pretentiousness of wine and are more attracted to wines that are not stodgy or taking themselves too seriously, according to **Rowan Gormley**, CEO of **Naked Wines**. “Presenting a bottle of wine at a party to show off how much you paid for it only happens among older drinkers. Younger drinkers are picking wines based on the story behind it, how they found it or what unique blend or region it comes from,” he said.

In fact, the internet has driven information about wine to be more available than ever as consumers surf websites, blogs and social media on computers and mobile devices. Images of wine labels populate the web, so the label design has become important for cross-pollinated recognition—shelf and **Google** Image search appeal.



“Millennials are attracted to less conservative brands. Instead they enjoy seeking out non-traditional producers, wines and real people with real stories—not brands that were fabricated. Non-traditional packaging is often one of the best ways to signal such things at the point of purchase. These brands must support their packaging with great stories that are real and that are shared through the website, social media and all touch points of the brand,” said **David Schuemann**, owner and creative director of **CF Napa Brand Design**.

Schuemann offers as an example the label and package **CF Napa** created for **Art+Farm's** new wine brand **St. Mayhem**. The Napa-based winery, as Schuemann said, “Leverages unique aging techniques never before used in the largely traditional wine category by aging white wines on ingredients like peach and ginger, and a red wine aged on coffee and jalapeño peppers.

“The packaging design for this unique wine brand needed to be as distinct as the wines themselves, without falling prey to appearing novelty.” **CF Napa's** solution takes a sophisticated black on black motif that reinforces the quality promise that **Art+Farm** is known for while communicating the creative energy of the brand that represents the unexpected.

Inspired by the craft beer and artisanal cocktail movement, the **St. Mayhem** label, with its tech-inspired black finish, subtly speaks to these consumers with the winery's story.

Other styles of label design can also woo Millennials and even discerning Boomers. “Hand-drawn type and calligraphy are becoming more prevalent,” said Schuemann. “Not only does this allow a brand to leverage a custom logo but it also offers a sense that the brand is more boutique and less corporate.”

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CF Napa’s label for **Pacific Highway Wine & Spirits’** 60 Souls Pinot Noir exemplifies this trendy approach.

Schuemann also sees a trend in label design with 18th and 19th century ornamental graphics and engravings re-engineered into modern expressions to suggest a modern yet nostalgic sensibility. **Treasury Wine Estates’** label for its **Beringer** Founder’s Estate Wines captures this approach.

Labels That Tell a Story Make a Sale

Invariably, package designers are increasingly embracing storytelling as one of the key sales enhancers, using the bottle, the label and the foil capsule as the vehicle for the winery message.

“Labels that evoke or tell a story attract consumers and allow them to relate to a brand and its wines on a much more personal level, taking them from awareness to trial to brand advocate,” said Schuemann. CF Napa’s case study of the transformation of the Italian-based **Luna Nuda’s** label and capsule demonstrates the storytelling approach to package design.

Schuemann saw Luna Nuda’s original label as “a tired cliché”—a Venetian gondolier at night. “That gave absolutely no hint of the quality of the wine.” To reshape the brand as more premium, the new logo “features a shining moon fashioned from tiny, hand-drawn stars stamped in gold foil and over printed with three different inks, which gave them more depth of gold patina. Embossing them to make the stars twinkle as light reflects off the bottle, was combined with a gold star on the midnight blue capsule to evoke the romantic Italian night sky.”

Tony Auston, creative director of **Auston Design Group**, thinks a label that tells a story can act as a visual aid in describing the unique attributes of the brand. As Auston pointed out in his August 2008 *WBM* article:

“The stories are limitless but may touch on family history: proprietors’ interests, be it fly fishing, symphonic music, vintage cars, etc.; the terroir of the region; specific vineyards; historical aspects of the region, etc. Illustrative components may include maps, illustrations of property or region, musical scores, symbology or whatever it takes to tell the story in a visually compelling way. Information on the back label can help explain or reinforce the message conveyed on the front. Perhaps best suited to mid- and upper-tiers, it is effective to some degree at all price points.”

Auston’s reinvented package design no doubt was partially responsible for the rousing success of the **Meiomi** Pinot Noir brand. The enlarged front label with its elegant script gave consumers the story of the wine while the added detailed gold foil border and linen paper stock communicated premium more than the previous label did. Combined with a style of Pinot consumers enjoyed made for a beautiful relationship, one that was worth the \$315 million **Constellation Brands** paid to purchase the brand from **Joe Wagner’s Belle Glos** in 2015.



Price Points and Case Production Can Determine Label Design

Jim Moon, principal of **Jim Moon Designs**, pointed out the obvious to all design firms about any wine package design: “It’s all subjective, and it all comes down to how far the client wants to go. That, in turn, can be based on a host of determinants, such as price points, the amount of wine produced, conflicting family opinions and the money they want to spend on package design.”



Moon expanded on price point: “It has a lot to do with what’s going to show up on a label. If you’ve got a bottle of wine that starts at, say, \$50 to \$100, the consumers who are willing to buy that are probably not going to take a big chance. Look at **Kistler** (Sebastopol, California), for example. That label has been unchanged forever, but look at their price point [\$60 and up] and their relatively small case production. They almost don’t need to adjust their labels. They have such a following. Look at **Harlan**. All those big estate, cult wines, many of them are just very, very formal, and they just are not going to budge because they’re talking to serious people. So their trend is to stay conservative, which, in itself, is a style that is effective by its unchanging simplicity.”

On the other hand, bottle designs that are a little bit risky but still bow to a winery’s preexisting level of formality are successful, said Moon. Small lot winery, **Sense of Place**, focused on Monterey County vineyards, allowed him to take some risks with their labels and coordinated capsules.

“It has a formal balance, but the icon that we came up with is a little on the risky side. When I say risky, it’s interesting. It’s very abstract, but it’s also, in terms of the layout and how it appears on the bottle and the accommodation of what’s going on in the capsule, very formal, yet it tells you what to expect in the bottle,” said Moon.

“I think capsules are often overlooked. I really enjoy working with them, making the entire package design work—you know, whatever’s on the label, to make that also work with the capsule. Nothing could make that point more than what I did with Sense of Place. I just took that design, and I took an element that was in that design of the icon and extended it into the capsule. I think without that capsule it would have taken it down a third in terms of its visibility. I think that the capsule and both those things just work together.”

The use of printing on the inside of the back label is another trending design that is both an eye-catcher and a story motif. Moon’s redesign of the legacy label and capsule for the 75,000-case **Honig Vineyard & Winery’s** Sauvignon Blanc is a textbook example of leveraging the back label real estate to pull consumers in. The size of the case load allowed the winery to invest in a risky package change.



“Honig’s Cabernet package is more formal; yet if you look at the Sauvignon Blanc bottle, that’s different because of the way we handled the printing on the inside back label. It’s printed in four-color process on 60 lb. Classic Crest Text sheets then die-cut,” Moon said. “The waved shape of the die cut at the top was added to enhance the Napa rolling hills feel.” The challenge of this back label was the special transparent adhesive that had to be found to successfully achieve the see-through appearance.

New Laser Etching Process Expands Label Design Capabilities

Designers are always on the lookout for new printing processes that can expand design capabilities. **Bryan Bremer**, art director at San Luis Obispo, California-based **Kraftwerk Design**, is particularly impressed with the recently available laser etching from **Paragon Labels** of Petaluma, California: **Laserweb**. It produces incredibly precise, intricate cuts in the label, giving it unique dimensional characteristics.

“They can do a lot of detail, basically kind of like a typical die cut, but you can get a lot more detail out of it. That’s a new process that we’re pretty interested in. We haven’t really seen anything like it. It can really hold the detail too, like lace work, so even when you apply it to the paper, there’s no issues of applying it to the bottle,” Bremer said.

According to **Travis Pollard**, vice president of sales and marketing at Paragon Label, “We own the only Laserweb in the world. Laser-cutting has been around for years and is gaining popularity quickly since it can produce some

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outstanding designs. What all the other laser cutters in the world cannot do is offer interior laser cutting that will work on a high-speed packaging system.

“Our laser can cut a label to look like lace. It can cut the exterior shape of the label and also make interior cuts on the label at the same time while removing the excess material inside those cuts. This leaves a clean, delicate label that can be applied very easily. The laser does not cut into the liner, so there is no danger of liner breakage during application.”

Innovative Labels Still Nod to Traditional Label Design

Smaller wineries remain more conservative in both the labels they want on their bottles and the amount of money they are willing to invest in label designs. “From my experience with small, family-owned wineries, they’re really not that willing to change the look and feel. They prefer to stay more in the formal balance. But, of course, it is all subjective. The wineries that are going to change designs the most are, in my opinion, some of the larger brands, which are trying to bring out a new wine release or a new brand name,” Moon said.

Although larger wineries with larger marketing budgets are commissioning designers to come up with more Millennial-targeted, eye-catching but wine-relevant labels and capsules, the wine industry overall has tended to be more cautious.

As **Jeff Hester**, founder of Oakland, California-based **Cult Partners** design firm, remarked, “I wouldn’t say that there are really

any new trends as the trend now is to be conservative. In my experience small production wines are shifting to rely more on stock capsules rather than doing a custom design. Custom capsules are always a consideration as part of a design project, and they always coordinated with the label. But that’s just a function of the economy of scale.”

Given that, Hester adds, “Traditional can still be really fancy. I think that is why wineries are staying ‘traditional’ because the perceived value of the conservative label is higher than the one that’s all over the place. Wineries are trying to push wines that are more expensive, now that we are past the recession. Traditional design lends itself to a perception of a premium product.”

But whether wineries veer toward traditional legacy labels or make “risky” design changes, the key to a label’s success is the story it communicates to consumers. And that’s only the start of this ever-evolving story. **WBM**



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