

Petroleum retail outlets as the mother of all POP's - the case study of BPCL:

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The reason why we have chosen to demonstrate our propositions through the case study of a petroleum outlet is because according to *Marcello Minale*, arguably the best known face for retail visual identity (RVI) programs for major oil companies across the world,

"The first petrol station (in 1925) was an extension of a grocery store, now it is the grocery store itself"

Petroleum outlets are like POP's inside POP's, much in the manner of movies plots inside movie plots.



A

Cornerstones of Strategy:

The strategy that we had evolved to arrive at our design concepts and solutions for BPCL were based on the following conditions intrinsic to the oil sector and the BPCL.

(i) "Difficult but not impossible" - a time to kill!

In its present state as well as looking ahead into the near future at the Indian petroleum RO scenario, and based on the brief received, the RVI game for BPCL had seemed like a mixed bag of prospects and problems, making it perhaps *"difficult, but not impossible"* as Michael Corleone states with murderous candor in Godfather 2 while issuing orders to assassinate his rivals.

Why was it difficult?

Since petroleum products retailing, certainly the fuel that is dispensed into our cars, is often perceived as *a commodity*

activity with broadly similar products that were unlikely to vary greatly between the principal suppliers, the company needed to perform in other areas to gain competitive advantage.

(ii) **But, why it wasn't impossible?**

We had reasons to believe that BPCL already had a couple of *performance advantages* in the form of killer '*ingredient values*'.

The key ingredient value here was its '*Pure for Sure*' (PFS) *branding* that BPCL had so assiduously built up since its induction in mid 2001. At the level of dealer feedback, most of them swore by it.

PFS was to BPCL's what '*Intel Inside*' was to Intel's cornerstone into building customer confidence in quality. Intel's CEO Craig Barrett had remarked that "Intel Inside" was a classic case of an 'ingredient value' representing *a larger than life brand value*.

(iii) **Loewy's charter of faith: looks matter!**

Raymond Loewy, the American designer, had said very early on:

"Between two products equal in price, function and quality, the better looking will outsell the other". While this has become a charter of faith for corporate branding in the last quarter of a century internationally, and in the nineties in India, these were words from one of the most distinguished industrial designers the world's ever known. Starting with designing the Gestetner machine in 1929 to designing the interiors of the Boeing aircraft, the interiors of a spacecraft for NASA, President Kennedy's Air Force One and of course, the latest variant of the Shell emblem (the "Pecten"), the French born *Raymond Loewy* had ended up giving the history of brands one of its most compelling arguments.

With respect to BPCL, it had been our endeavor to induct the factor of "better looking" as a decisive input into our conceptual designs, without in any way, using it as a superficial attribute.

However, it had also to be remembered that "the motorist is not a fool" as Paddy Briggs, Manager for Shell's retail identity program (1990-95) had asserted. So, looks obviously had to be combined with functionality and comfort.

(iv) **Does the design tell a story?**

Sometimes, the most fascinating of designs vanish without a trace. The reason for that would have been their momentariness.

One way to build in a lasting quality into a design, like the

way Satyajit Ray did with his 'Pather Panchali', would be to try and tell a story through the design. In other words, build in a narrative into the design.

The reason why a narrative is important is because only those *products created with a story* can *display meanings*. And out of these meanings can one draw *metaphors and symbolism*. Where this happens, the product becomes the story, the product designer the storyteller.

In the case of BPCL, there was a powerful ingredient already encrypted in its logo - the yin and yang. So, that gave us the theme upon which to build our storyboard. And chalk out the identities, defined as the sameness in the language of shape and form that links one object to another and holding a narrative together.

(1.4) Experience designing - product vs. process:

A narrative, therefore, necessarily implies that there is not just a product, but a process involved as well. This emphasis on continuity and closure got reflected as a paradigm shift in design in the nineties, partly driven by a *consumer-pull logic rather than a producer logic*, and partly by the *availability of better cladding, lighting, printing and pre-fab technologies*, that increasingly allowed companies to dream up corporate visions that foretold elaborate setups, increasingly more gay, more colorful and friendly and placed the consumer's mindset center stage and not in the wings, seemingly, forever waiting.

Under the earlier circumstances, it used to be that the designer made an object and walked away. Under the changed set of circumstances, *designing an object* alone did not guarantee giving the customer what he wanted. One had to *design an experience*, which in turn, called for a process. And which alone could guarantee a long-term relationship with the customer - making it evocative for customers to want to hang around for a longer time, for *children* and *teenagers* to want to make *a fun trip* down there, for the woman of the house to see the RO as *a social*

space? Ought to there be more colors, patterns, activities unrelated to oil dispensing.

(1.5) From mundane activity to a social ritual:

Which then brought us to the factor of social ritual.

Experience suggests that *to gain mindshare in a crowded market*, it may be necessary to convert a commercially driven mundane activity (filling petrol in the car) into a social ritual through a notion called "*site value capture*" A great example of this would be *Starbucks*, which grew from a \$25 million to a \$1.5 billion business enterprise in the nineties, by converting a rather mundane beverage consumption activity, viz., coffee drinking, into a social ritual.

.To *make an RO into an inviting social space*, it would have to be made warm, comfortable and comforting, as well as groovy wherever possible, given generation X's propensity for an MTV short-attention- span culture.

[(1.6) *Users are not designers:*

(1.7) *Design with 'solution-after-next-principle':*

This sets the problem and even the purpose aside for the moment and asks: "If you had already arrived at an ideal solution (which we seldom do) what new challenges would confront you?" Would, e.g., ACM's turn out to be economically unsound, less robust than thought before, less compelling in their finish in the long run and so on? , Should the new RVI be designed and engineered to last for a long time, or should it be designed so that it can absorb the shocks of a potential collapse from unseen sources?

It's the difference between over-engineering and careful engineering. (Gerald Nadler, Deptt of Ind and Systems Engg, Univ sn Cal, LA)]

B

BPCL's corporate goals woven into Strategy:

Bharat Petroleum defines its corporate goals, in that order, as consisting of the following:

Caring

Reliable

Innovative

(i) **Caring** would imply the approach of the organization in its interactions with its people - customers, employees etc., and represent *an interaction that is comforting, and one that results in a positive experience.*

Meanings inherent in caring:

Loving, doting, attached, fond, tender, cherish, sensitive, comforting, comfortable

Recommendations:

Caring should be felt and seen. Hence our interpretation of caring assumed the following features:

In terms of form: soft, curved, feminine, wavy (not rough hewn, no hard, jagged lines)

In terms of colors: pleasant, bright but not too luminiscent, pastels, off whites, no primary colors, no reflectiveness, no representations of the color steel

(ii) **Reliability** would imply the *approach of the organization in term of its working and services.* Choices provided to its customer, prompt fuel dispensing, easy access to services.

Meanings inherent in being efficient:

prompt, apt, proper, adept, proficient, capable

Recommendations:

Reliability is something that would need to be connotated by *speed and efficiency.*

Reliability, as a condition, would need to be implemented in terms of its operations. Hence our suggestion would be to interpret the meaning of efficient in terms of the choices available to the customer, with everything being clean, trim, and proper and in place, as well as well organized. In terms of artifacts, this would have to translate into effective sign ages, clean surroundings, no messy surfaces.

Translated into form: Simple and clean forms, symmetry, (no complications, no unnecessary details, where used, details ought to be concealed)

Translated into *colors*: off whites or off blacks, blue, which in any case is the corporate color for efficiency (no mid grays, and avoid dark grays)

Translated into *operations*, what would those *services* be? efficient, prompt, proper service. DSMS programmed to address the customer with a sequence of concerns, such as: would you want your oil checked? Would you pay by cash or credit? Thank you sir, etc

(iii) Innovative would imply that the *organization is looking ahead into the future.. Things would certainly need to look different from the rest in field.*

Meaning:

Innovative: creative, original, inventive, imaginative, ingenious

Recommendations:

Innovative would need to be implemented in all the aspects of the retail outlet - innovation in service, choices to the customer and the artifacts around the retail outlet.

Hence our suggestion would be to interpret the meaning of innovative in terms of the new schemes being available to the customer, or his attention brought to interesting new things being done or slated to be done at the retail outlet. Is there something that can be offered that is different?

Translated into form, what would those be? (*Interpretations for form*):

unusual, unique forms, sculpture by an artist, something that is a one-off

Translated into colors, what would they be? (*Interpretations for colour*):

splashes of colour, painting/mural by an artist, graded colors where possible

Translated into action: (*Interpretations for service and schemes*):

new schemes and services being offered.

C

Key metaphors driving design concepts and solutions:

Water, wind, and fire as metaphors to represent BPCL's corporate goals and design intent, with *the 'Yin and Yang' remaining* common to all the three conceptual solutions as *a running thread of the narrative, and as* , our interpretation of *the proposed fifth element.*

'Yin and Yang'.

The 'yin and yang' will form a core story common to all three solutions. And then, each solution *builds around a metaphor to form the outer story - three in all -, each*

like an outer ring around the kernel of the yin and yang.
The metaphors represent the BPCL's corporate goals.

The three approaches are based on the following three metaphors:

4.1. Water representing the condition of Fluid

Fluid, a derivative of water would *manifest itself as being wavy, circular, reminiscent of the lotus, and of course, the yin and yang form itself; as soft, pliable, accommodating by taking on the shape of the crucible or its course; never leaving an indelible imprint except across a long period of time or in turbulence, source of sustenance and comfort, also a means of satiation*

4.2. Wind representing the condition of Outreach

Outreach, a derivative of wind with its ability to move across vast spans of spaces, could manifest itself in forms *associated with the elliptical inspired after the shape of wings, the shape of clouds as also by the marks left by wind on sand and water; wind is associated with freshness, with seeds of uniqueness from distant lands and which could connote an ability to imbibe new ideas, which in turn could represent the quality of the exquisite*

4.3. Fire representing the condition of Energy

Energy, a derivative of fire, could be *visualized as arcs, as angular lines as in spits of fire, as triangular silhouettes or tongues of flames, springing forth in occasional bursts, in sudden, asymmetrical movements, characterized by great vitality and causing a force-field around it*

In conclusion:

Clearly, creating a brand that qualifies as "cultural" would take more than just clever positioning. It would have to rely on uncommon insight, empathy and sensibilities about contexts, and all of this abstraction combined with superior execution through engineering skills and technology understanding.

But at the end, also a lot of pure luck.

We stand here wondering if it would be better to throw up your hands in resignation or quote instead the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who had said in 1600:

"We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we get to know our principles. And reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them....."