



What's missing from many corporate identity projects, says Ruediger Goetz, principal with Matthias Simon of Simon & Goetz (Frankfurt, Germany), is the truest benefit to the client's brand—that is, business success. Many designs produced today are visually exciting and some even win industry awards, he acknowledges, but what is the actual worth of those designs? Do they actually help the client for whom they were designed?

Simon & Goetz's identity design for Rotwild, an ultra-premium mountain bike brand—done from the ground up—is a good example of how an effective brand image is created and how that identity is crucial for corporate efficiency.

Normally, Simon & Goetz works with relatively large corporations. But the Rotwild project was different: Three engineering students, almost done with their university studies, saw that there was room in the mountain bike market for a new niche: a high-cost, high technology bike with the cache of German engineering. They turned to the design firm for help. Sensing an opportunity to craft a new company from the ground up, Simon & Goetz created everything from Rotwild's name and logo to its bike and accessory designs.

"We put a strong focus on the actual product design—its graphic language or style," explains Goetz. His firm was an ideal choice for a start-up client with little budget for market research: Simon & Goetz already had experience in branding for the bicycle market from having worked with a much larger client. Much of the design firm's work was based on previous studies, in addition to information the new client had gathered and a detailed national and international competitor comparison study.

"They could see the hype in the mountain bike market that was mainly coming from the U.S., where the sport was rooted," adds Goetz. "Bikes became a fashion statement and very contemporary. But the market had too many competitors at the low end, and [these entrepreneurs] knew they couldn't compete in a mass market where low price is always the main factor. At the same time, the few really premium brands available at the time were American."

Their success would come from stressing the technological advantage of the then-unnamed Rotwild brand. "Technology is a strong discriminating factor with German engineering, considering our cars, machinery, and so on. This new German brand also had to be attractive, outstanding in its physical shape, unique in its features, and memorable. With a high price, it had to have a high appearance," he says. Rotwild's founders chose to pursue a "preference strategy," versus a "mass strategy."

The first thing Simon & Goetz did was to create a brand model that is described in the same way a person might be. "It is simple and helps the agency and the client see the brand. This is [important] since in the long term, staff could change on both sides. It is simple enough to be understood by persons with less communication talent or education. A fully integrated brand [can only] happen if all of the individuals involved have a similar level of understanding and valuation for the brand," Goetz says.

For the new bike company, the designers devised this simple descriptive sentence for the brand's personality: "[The company] offers the most consequent competition technology in mountain biking by German engineering." They also developed a set of three core values: German technology and engineering; competition competence; and masculinity.

The statement and value together create a certain image and, ideally, a positive prejudice about this personality. This prejudice must be successful because it is the basis for every potential social and emotional contact the brand will make. In the end, the brand image of Rotwild was boiled down to "the most technical mountain bike" or "the only German hard-core mountain bike."

Now the firm could work on the brand's name. Three of the concepts that were considered each presented to the client with a corresponding visual concept. The first was based on the entrepreneurs' original idea of offering kits with which buyers could shape their own very personal bike. The word "kitz" actually means "small deer" in German, and the speed and outdoor affinity of a deer seemed appropriate for a fast bike. But the name lacked masculinity—99 percent of Rotwild buyers are male, mostly age 30- to 45-years-old and highly educated—and strength.

"It was a good first step for our exploration, but it was not a preferred direction. In addition, the inventors gave up the kit idea early on," Goetz recalls.

A second viable concept was related mountain biking to the north wall of the Swiss mountain called Eiger, not the highest peak there, but a location famous for a very difficult and dangerous climb. Its north wall or "nordwand," especially, has highly difficult and rough conditions. So to use the word "nordwand" as a concept representing extreme challenge, paired with the symbol of a capricorn, felt appropriate.

But then a third concept emerged, actually a hybrid of its predecessors. "Rotwild" is the name of a common type of deer [in Germany,] and as a German, when I hear this name, I visualize a very conservative and old-fashioned hunting scene. It's very German. It's short and remarkable," says Goetz, noting that the name also carried with it the ideas of speed and wildness. An additional benefit: Aggressiveness is hidden in its name, even to the non-German speaker.

The name also enjoys high recognition due to the juxtaposition of its old-fashioned sensibility on a contemporary, technologically-based brand. "The strange combination of conservatism and an ultra-modern appearance also give the brand acceptance in a very hip and young market segment without relying on formal trend-oriented elements like color or graphics," the designer adds.

Simon & Goetz also took the stance that the product was a "German cycling device." It unemotionally split the brand away from being a mere bicycle: This is instead a total technology experience with a much higher perceived value than a "bike." Rotwild would become the antithesis of the traditional mountain biking lifestyle where colors and trends are the main discriminating factors that pit other brands against each other.

The next step was to develop a logo. The designers wanted the new identity to behave in a way that no brand in the market had previously. The new line would bring "mobility to nature," explains Goetz, with the benefit of high tech German engineering. So any visual symbol would have to equate the nature of the sport, a deer and a sense of technology.

Simon & Goetz designers developed a very masculine, hard-edged image of a deer. The logo looks modern, but it also hints—with stylized antlers and body shape—of classic German hunting scenes. The head of the deer is used alone in some applications, similar to a trophy head that might be found hanging on the wall of an old hunting lodge.

"There was nothing like it on the market," recalls Goetz. "This was an old-fashioned name with a very technical brand experience."

The typography the designers developed matches the brand values: For general design use other than the wordmark, they selected Trade Gothic, which Goetz describes as "an American version of Futura." "It served the need of good readability on the product and for copy," he notes.

It also created a good contrast to the hand-drawn logotype, constructed from extended letterforms that speak of the speed aspect of the brand. Its crisp style also communicates the high value of the product and plays with the ambiguous idea of modern arms and military technology through its high-tech, stenciled style.

The design of the bike itself followed suit. The bike had to look technical, competitive and masculine. "It need to be look very hard and aggressive, almost weapon-like," the designer says. The product's design is ruled by a simple brand characteristic: to use very unique, constant and noticeable material and color. "We developed a graphic style which is almost reminiscent of the graphical surface of sophisticated military and defense technology. Or imagine the elements you see on the wing of an airplane."

Since its first line released six years ago, Rotwild has only used polished aluminum with red, gray and white as application colors. To differentiate between various price points, applications and technologies, the color code is varied slightly. This creates very high brand recognition—a simple approach but one which no other brand was employing at the time.

It was very important that the design language was first developed with the focus on the actual bike design and its graphics, says Goetz. In the second step, this is translated into media like print or web. A visual bond between the product and all media continues to be the design team's goal.

"This is definitely a well-known and respected bike in the German market. Only 2,000 bikes are sold each year, given its price, but it was chosen by a leading biking magazine as the most desirable mountain bike on the market," Goetz says. "The client also continues to win awards for design, typography and product design, but their success as a business is the most important thing."

This article is excerpted from the upcoming book, "LogoLounge" (Rockport Publishers), to be released in February 2003.