



In the age of noise, how does the voice of a premium spirit brand get heard?

Kate Stites, Senior Designer at Brown-Forman Beverages, demonstrates the power of quiet.

The competition for consumer attention on shelf has reached a new level of din, as brands employ packaging and messaging techniques to stand out from each other. What's a traditional, premium brand to do? We spoke recently with Kate Stites about her experience designing secondary packaging for leading spirit brands like Jack Daniel's, Old Forester, Chambord, el Jimador Tequilas and others. In her words, "I try to think of Coco Chanel who said that it was always better to be slightly underdressed."

BXP: Tell us what you mean by underdressed.

KS: "I try to use simplicity to get attention. People are so bombarded with visual noise that they are drawn to a quieter execution—a place where their eyes can rest a bit, and they absorb one or two important things on the package. With a brand like Jack Daniel's, I can usually make a case for simplicity. I think of Coco Chanel. She said one should get all dressed up, turn quickly to face a mirror and remove one accessory. For this reason, I always try to finish a design concept and walk away from it for at least 24 hours, so that I can come back and edit with fresh eyes."

BXP: You are highly recognized for package design. How long have you been working for Brown-Forman and what is your secret sauce?

KS: "I've been designing for Brown-Forman for nearly 12 years. I started doing production design and moved into working on secondary packaging. It has been my focus for the past five or six years now, and it's really where my heart is. I work primarily on the Jack Daniel's Family of Brands. I think that communicating a brand's essence through materials and finishes is preferable to using words in secondary packaging."

BXP: What are some of the ways you elevate your brand's shelf presence?

KS: "The substrate and decorating techniques we use matter. For Jack Daniel's, the apertures, edges, and seams show the black color all the way through



the board. This results in a highly refined package. The uncoated appearance of the board gives a beautiful matte background for varnishes, foils and silkscreen printing. Again, elegance is in the simplicity."

BXP: What are some of your best practices when it comes to designing secondary packaging?

KS: "We take great care in crafting our spirits—from our master distillers and the coopers who make our barrels to the folks filling the bottles. It is critical that the same level of care is reflected in the secondary packaging. We want the people who enjoy our product to see the pride reflected in every detail—how it opens and closes, how the contents show through an aperture, how strong it is and what it feels like during unboxing. Attention to detail and restraint are the two greatest tools, I believe."

BXP: Here are some buzz terms in packaging

design. Give us your take on them.

▶ **Dyed-through folding board:**

"I love the dyed through board. It offers finishing that is really difficult to achieve with SBS (solid bleached sulfate). With a dyed through board, the substrate is part of the design, not just something that needs to be covered up. Even better, the finish is so rich we end up using fewer varnishes because we don't need to protect the color. It's really good at resisting scuffing, and it doesn't take fingerprints. There's a lot to love."

▶ **Custom-colored folding board:**

"We work with NEENAH Packaging to develop custom colors for most of our projects. We occasionally use stock colors, but are very fortunate to be able to create our own unique board."

▶ **Stability of the board:**

"It has to be solid as a rock. We once had a minimum of 26pt specified for SBS used in our secondary packaging. When I first started exploring dyed board, we needed to have two sheets of 13pt board laminated together to meet this threshold. I didn't consider that the strength added through lamination is significant. One of the very first things I learned about paper was how important weight is when trying to convey quality—even more so in folding cartons. A strong carton can convey quality more convincingly than words."

BXP: Everybody wants sustainable packaging. How does your package design align with this brand mission for Brown-Forman?

KS: "We have an internal sustainability team, and we moved much of our secondary packaging to NEENAH Packaging dyed-through board. We were able to remove the plastic window film that helped us save on materials and lower costs. This created an environmentally friendly carton that I'm very proud of."

To see some of Kate Stite's packaging and her work with NEENAH, visit neenahpackaging.com

