
Confessions of a Design Entrepreneur: An Interview with Mitch Nash of Blue Q

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Blue Q, a “designer-friendly” gift manufacturer founded in 1988 in Boston, Massachusetts, was the brainchild of brothers Seth and Mitch Nash. Mitch ran a successful music merchandising business and Seth was a high-tech engineer. Built on a single gag gift, “FlatCat,” a two-dimensional cardboard kitty that was marketed as the “Perfect Pet,” Blue Q now produces a line of personal care products, confections and assorted gift items ranging from fridge magnets to car fresheners. Wit reigns in the titles and package design of products like “Tainted Love,” “Wash Away Your Sins,” “Miso Pretty,” “Sparkling Mullet: Body Wash and Car Wash,” and “Dumb Gum.”

Over the past 17 years, Blue Q (now based in a renovated player piano factory in the Berkshires with 13 employees) has become a wellspring for comic, retro and satiric graphic design. Mitch, who has no formal graphic design training other than working at the elbows of Vinnie D’Angelo, Alexander Isley, Michael Mabry, Modern Dog, Haley Johnson, Stefan Sagmeister, Louise Fili and others, art directs all the products. Here he discusses how his passion for design contributes to this wildly successful entrepreneurial venture

Heller: Blue Q is such a design-savvy company. Indeed all your products—from cosmetics to candy to air fresheners—are cleverly designed and entertainingly conceived. Some might say you’re the quintessential “enlightened client.” How did you become so enlightened? And what attracted you to graphic design and designers in the first place?

Nash: Our mother is an artist and our father is a maverick businessman sort, and they were always taking us to museums and on business excursions. Seeing “Calder’s Circus” at the Whitney changed my life. So going for the art angle in business was a given when my brother Seth and I started the company.

Heller: When you started this business, other than profit, what was your goal? Did you want to provide a service? Did you see a need that required filling? Did you plan to save the world?

Nash: We’ve always wanted to be our own bosses, like our father. We wanted to be able to experiment and not get bored. The only way to do that is with profits; and dealing with boring basics like inventory turn-over and distribution was necessary to save you from all the fantastic creative mistakes, so when you get a hit you can really work it. We still make some spectacular errors that look blindingly obvious in hindsight.

Heller: What are some of those errors? I'm sure the neophyte designer entrepreneurs reading this would benefit from a little candor.

Nash: A few years ago when we wanted to get into playful edibles, we started with chocolates. The vendor had really good foil-wrapped chocolates we could handle in our assembly area, 16 to a box, with a cute pull-out drawer. We included them in our "Queen" and "Dirty Girl" brands. But the intricate boxes cost a fortune to print and assembling the grid of die-cut cells took forever. The costing sheet went to hell. And the extra handling with ice packs to Florida and California were killers.

A couple of years ago, we also created a bath brand called "Beautifleur," which had characters made with images of flowers and watercolors. Very pop, I found this nice artist, paired her with a writer and designer and went to it. But there was too thin of a plot. We couldn't riff the flowers. I think we can make very, very attractive stuff but without a sub-text to riff on, it's too easy, anybody can do that surface decoration gig. Writing carries the weight. "Beautifleur" went to TJ Maxx a month after we released it, they loved it and called back looking for more but it was a one-truckload mess.

Heller: So, the moral of this is?

Nash: It is cheaper to pull the plug and eat the art than to blindingly march forward and fill the tubes with goo.

Heller: Your products are very well distributed. How difficult was it for you to break into the crowded gift product market?

Nash: Distribution is everything, and the independent sales reps of the world are buried in product lines. It is very hard to punch through. In 1988 with the "FlatCat," we broke the cardinal rule of getting into this industry by having only one item. Luckily it was a cardboard cut-out of a cat, not a kangaroo. We displayed it in all-yellow living room type sets at gift shows to stop the buyers. There was a lot of gimmickry to break into the marketplace.

Heller: How do you define a "market?"

Nash: A market is where we can make a bunch of ideas that explore either a brand-feel or a particular manufactured process. You can make a market with a brand like "Dirty Girl" or "Total Bitch," or you can decide on a particular item to manufacture a slew of ideas. Either way, you have to stack up the products. Either way, a market equals a bulk of offerings. There are one-off ideas everywhere, but it's the larger opportunities where we can creatively cookie-cutter; that's market.

For instance, somehow we met the manufacturer of Binaca breath spray. It's such a useless item—these little spritzers, very eighties. But so what? They are easy to make. We had Dana Wyse play with it, and transform it into a "life-changing product," and she gave us "Instant Irish Accent Breath Spray," and "Instantly Understand Fine Art Breath Spray," and others. So if we can make a collection, the salespeople can get behind it, we amortize our development effort and they amortize the process of getting stores aboard.

Heller: It is one thing to work with talented designers like Haley Johnson and Modern Dog to create off-center (and sometimes off-color) packages, another for this to succeed with consumers. What are the least successful design campaigns? And why?

Nash: The least successful products look good but are “mathematically incorrect.” There is always good logic behind even the simplest item that adds up.

Heller: Does this mean the most successful products are somehow not well designed but the financial models work? What do you actually mean by “mathematics?”

Nash: I use the term “mathematically correct” because I love the clinical dissection of why something will work. The best-selling packages have facts in their favor that add up and hold water. So you can analyze them on their visual merits, but they harness facts first and foremost about the buyer’s brain.

Heller: What is your competition?

Nash: Boredom. Buyers want new things and ideas. Sometimes we have made too many product extensions of an idea when people are over it.

Heller: Would you agree that your products are “novelties?” After all, the styles you employ, shall we call them kitsch, retro, contempo, Gen XY or Z, etc., fit into what might be termed a novelty or “entertainment” category. How would you define your lines?

Nash: I hate the word novelty with a passion because that’s trick-birthday-cake candles for ninety-eight cents. We are fantastic candles! Our fare is gleefully produced in bulk, but magically rendered, intimate by virtue of its creativity. That democratic design element is our main currency, and our average retail price point is well under ten bucks. The less expensive, the more it has to entertain, maybe.

Heller: It requires confidence in your ideas and “mathematics” to produce products that satirize the sitting President of the United States. Did you believe you were taking a risk when you skewered Mr. Bush in an air freshener, or was this a personal imperative that needed to be fulfilled?

Nash: It’s important for us to keep our staff entertained! And to show where our heart lies. But realistically our “George Bush’s Dumb-Ass Head on A String Car Freshener” acts as a lighting rod and pulls in other sales, too.

Heller: Tell me about other personal favorites? What product and which designs are the most exciting for you?

Nash: I love working with templates for art. In other words, finding the fresh format to make the core item presentation special. For instance, our “Boss Lady” body mist box has no sides; it’s a diamond shape with two panels joining to be the front and two panels joining to be the back of the box. It is a package with no sides! That makes me excited. And we are always pushing the machinery with die cuts and effects and embosses and embellishments and whatever. Not just to spend more, but to make everything a richer, deeper object. We like making it all look hard; the back and forth struggle with our vendors is a strategic weapon against copycats.

An example is the Art Deco inspired “Hot and Flashy” soapbox we just printed, a jewel with incredibly detailed illustrations by Haley Johnson. It is my new favorite, very Edison Electric, character-driven, perfect tone. There is intricate foiling in every crevice, and it literally flashes. And the foil die is unlike anything the foiling guy at the printer has ever seen. It costs a lot, but [is] what makes the item an item.

Heller: Who was the first designer you commissioned?

Nash: Michael Mabry was the first great one. He was a huge confidence builder; I was a beginner art director. That didn’t matter to Michael so much. I buried him with my late-night doodles, and we clicked. Michael’s really nice and a craftsman. Precise and insightful. He is a big name and so we of course used him to attract others! Michael recommended we talk to Alex Isley, who we called and he came to see us at our booth at the New York Gift Show with his work in a shopping bag. Shirt never properly tucked in. Perfect fit. We didn’t know what we wanted to make together. After a few weeks we somehow started talking up refrigerator magnets. Alex is real scrawler of ideas, and sent one specific scrawl that triggered our line of refrigerator magnets.

Heller: How much license do you give to your designers, and how much creative control do you wield as art director to retain the Blue Q look?

Nash: We like to give lot of creative license so the designers give us more bang for the buck; it’s as simple and manipulative as that! I am either complaining, complimenting or helping to work every detail, its always one of the three! The designers need to know you are with them in the trenches. If the magic is happening, I can be very out of the picture as they do the art. But if you rubberstamp stuff—even great stuff—the designers get bored. I really sell my participation. I believe as a client you have to watch very carefully, and you can’t fake it by just saying “it’s marvelous” and exchanging an air kiss over the phone.

Heller: What is next? Have you simply niched yourself into a corner producing quirky products, or is there another product avenue yet to be explored?

Nash: More mid-tier and mass merchants want our stuff. We used to be an alternative source; now the world's very agreeable to having us making noise. We are sorting that out.

Heller: But isn't there a danger in losing your "alternative" status?

Nash: Alternative status be damned (within reason). Sometimes you just want the damn doors and the tonnage and the rush of putting a lot of boxes of the same thing on a tasty wooden pallet! And you want it sooner rather than later because the real point is getting lots of people to enjoy the stuff.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).