

Blue Q has been manufacturing 'Life improving, joy bringing, mind altering, universally praised products since 1988', so says the company's website. Although I cannot vouch for the aforementioned life improvement, the so-called 'joy bringing' and 'mind altering' is not far from an existential parsing of the truth. This is particularly true for an ever-expanding coterie of artists, designers, and typographers who have conceived, designed, and fabricated Blue Q's joyful brands of eclectic novelty products – from body fragrances to soaps, from chewing gums to candies, from bumper stickers to magnets, from vinyl tote bags to coasters, from car air fresheners to breath sprays, most featuring quirky (often tastefully challenged) brand names like 'Cat Butt', 'Dirty Girl', 'Hot & Flashy', 'Miso Pretty', 'Total Bitch', 'Get Real', 'Mullet', 'Gnome', 'Virgin/Slut', as well as the spiritually sublime 'Wash Away your Sins', and my personal favourite 'Steve's House of Charm'.

Under the creative direction of co-founder and pop culture maven Mitch Nash, who was never trained as a graphic designer but has the zealous obsessions and keen eyes of one, Blue Q has cornered the boutique specialty gift market in the United States with products that appeal to visual culture comfort zone. This perhaps sounds speciously high tone since in this article I am referencing, among other things, breath sprays with titles like 'Ass Kisser', 'If Marijuana Were Legal', 'Understand Modern Art', and 'Instant Swedish Accent Spray' and boxed sweets called 'Candy from Strangers', 'Instant Irish Accent', 'I'm Not a Republican', and 'I'm Not a Bigot', to name a few, but given his sly blend of high-performance crass design and highly sophisticated infantile wit, Nash has astutely tapped a flowing consumerist vein in the body politic.

Despite some of its decidedly goofy, strip-mall-looking designs, Blue Q is a well-oiled strategic

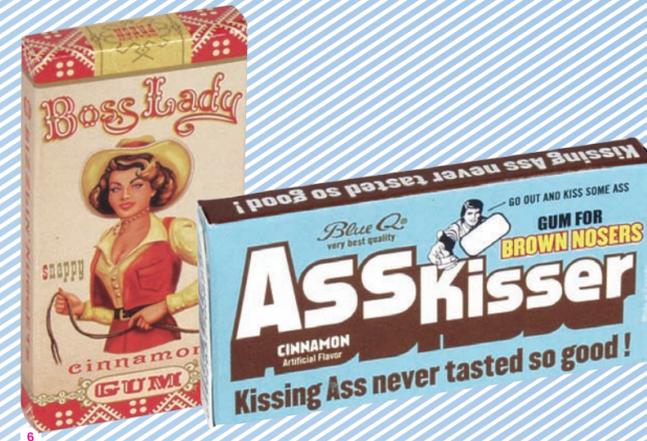
machine with a clear understanding of its audience – youthful (but not always young) fans of irony – and how the delicate balance of design and wit telegraphs moods and messages that, in turn, tickle funny bones. As the brain behind Blue Q's corporate brash Nash inspires unique ways of using design and encourages designers to twist their innate senses of humor to make visual products that are at once serious and self-mocking. He would have done quite well as the captain of more mainstream branding ship – Cap'n Nash – but always felt happier as the prodigal outsider, breaking those stilted rules that pound creativity into mediocrity.

Nash does not follow conventional wisdom. He works in a two-storey, turn-of-the-century former piano factory located in a once vital, though long depressed, old New England industrial city, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Blue Q's historic headquarters – reminiscent of Pee-Wee's Playhouse –



# Blue Q: Novelty Typecasting

by Steven Heller



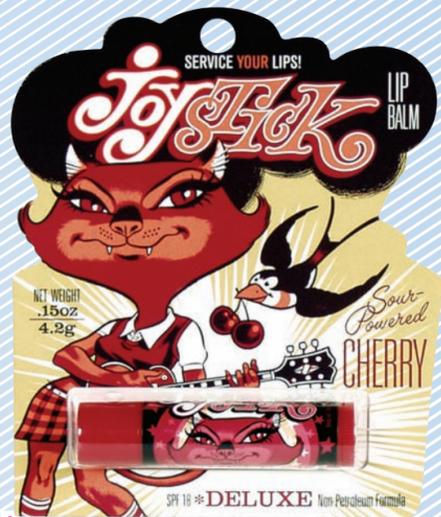
- 'Dirty Girl' body products (1999), designed by Haley Johnson Design with hand-drawn scripts. Copywriter: Mitch Nash.
- 'Hot & Flashy' body products (2005) designed by Haley Johnson Design in an Art Deco pastiche. Copywriter: Kelley Lear.
- 'Miso Pretty' body products (2004) designed and illustrated by Fiona Hewitt. Copywriter: Kelley Lear.
- 'Total Bitch' soap (2001) designed by Haley Johnson Design using collage elements that parody typical soap products.
- 'Get Real' good and gritty soap, using exfoliating lemon peel (2006) designed by Haley Johnson Design in the style of a fruit label, (Deborah Sims). Copywriter: Mike Gibbs.
- 'Boss Lady' cinnamon gum (2005) designed by Haley Johnson Design in a western bandana style.
- 'Ass Kisser' cinnamon gum (2006) designed by Modern Dog as part of a line of breath products.
- 'Wash Away Your Sins' towelettes (1999) designed by Haley Johnson Design as one of a larger line of body products.
- 'Steve's House of Charm' lip balm (2005) designed by Aesthetic Apparatus. Copywriter: Kelley Lear.

is filled with its products as well as open drawers overflowing with toys, gizmos, gadgets, curios, and other things that inspire Nash and his staff. During a recent daylong visit I wanted to learn how Blue Q's peculiar design mojo is conceived and developed. So for starters I asked Nash how he selected typefaces appropriate for his products? 'I never look for fonts,' he responded. 'It would be like picking paint chips to paint the kitchen! So I only reject submitted fonts (submitted by designers) that look cluttered. A brand name can be stylized and be over the top, but the type must protect the idea.'

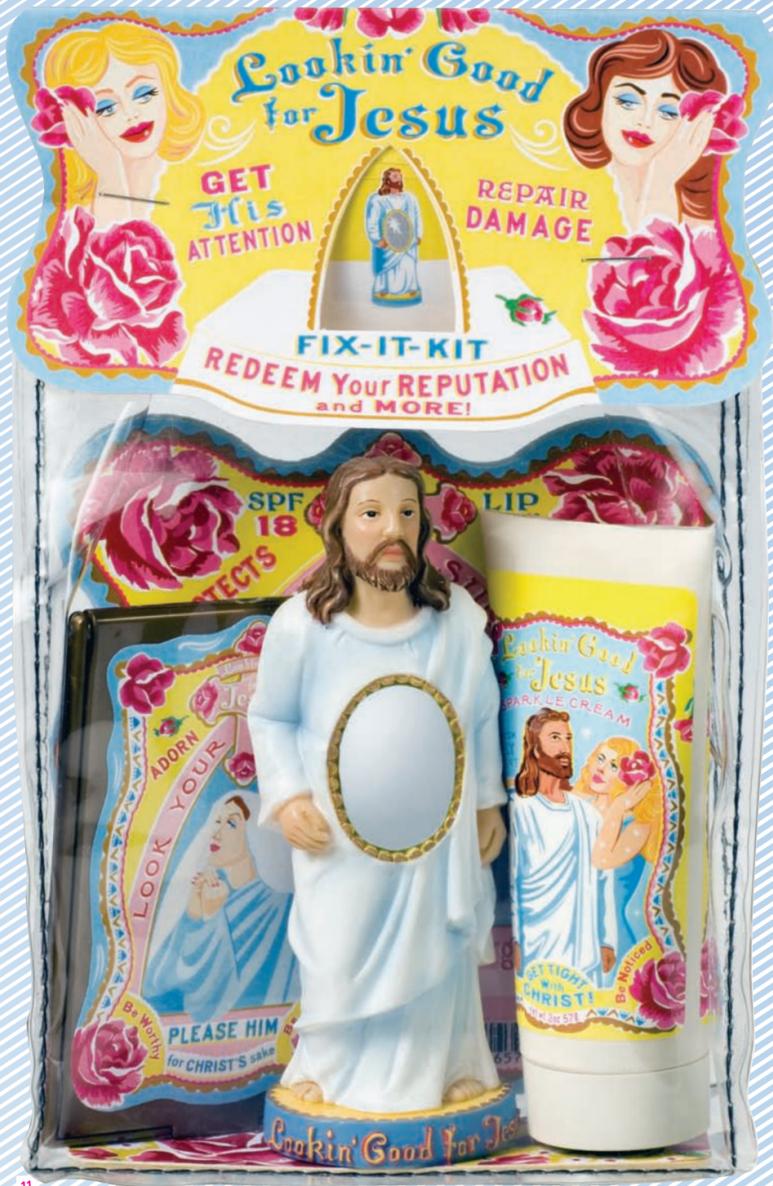
Type that protects (as well as serves) is a novel concept. Yet Nash has his visceral preferences, which include shadow and outline fonts he says 'feel heavy and dramatic'. So I asked him, even with these 'over the top' products, shouldn't the type echo or support the content of the product rather than merely have a heavy and dramatic presence? 'Type wants to help the reader see the point as fast as possible,' he sagely replies, which leads, by way of example, to a brief discussion about the typographic scheme for the bestselling product 'Miso Pretty', a line of body washes, soaps, mists, and more items, with a pun for a name and designed with an ironic, loving eye towards hybrid Hong Kong commercial vernacular. With this product, the illustration and lettering must be in perfect sync for the graphic concept to succeed, otherwise it could come off as just plain silly, or worse, dumb. But because the illustrator/designer Fiona Hewitt, who was born in Scotland but lived in China, has been given a relatively free hand to evolve the image – 'we actually wrote the brand around her', explains Nash – the product is always fresh in many ways. 'She's always using new serif fonts and likes to stack a script font on top of them which looks really handsome,' adds Nash. 'And it's cool to have two fonts in the span of two or three words, because the change acts like a comma. It may not be the type purist's dream solution, but 'Miso Pretty' is not about typographic purity.

Still, I wanted to know whether Nash ever considers more neutral type treatments for his conceptual products? 'Anytime we try to be too neutral we end

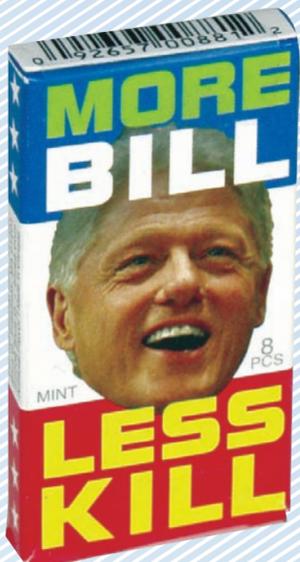




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9 'Joy Stick' lipstick (Cherry flavour) (2006) designed by Michel Casarramona. Copywriter: Kelley Lear.

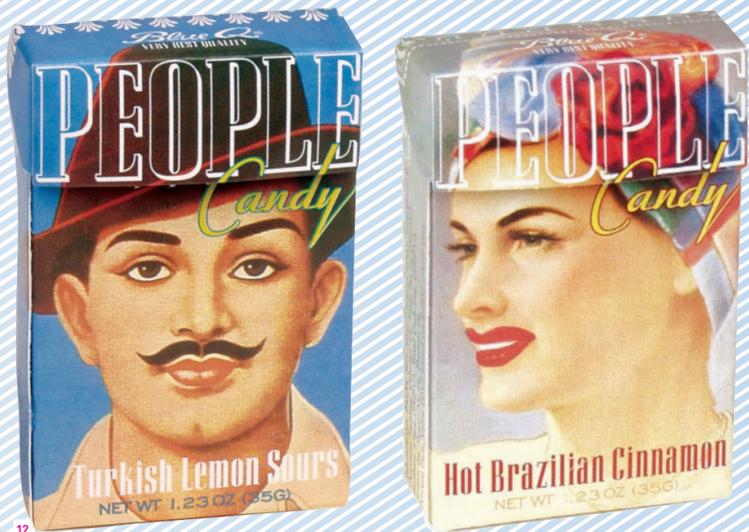
10 'More Bill' 'Less Kill' chewing gum (2006) designed by Modern Dog in a wishful thinking style.

11 'Looking Good For Jesus' fix-it-kit (2005) designed by Haley Johnson Design in a heavenly manner.

12 'People Candy' (Hot Brazilian Cinnamon and Turkish Lemon Sours) (2006) designed by Louise Fili Ltd.

13 'Joint' candy (2007) designed by Mother (the ad agency) and 'Get Lucky' gum (2006) designed by Modern Dog.

14 'Miso Pretty' tattoos (2004) designed by Fiona Hewitt and 'World Peace' tattoos (2005) designed by Vinnie D'Angelo.



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up in the close-out bin at T. J. Maxx (the American discount department store, and franchise of a British chain). Overall people look to Blue Q for cheeky humour. It's harder to be humorous than handsome. So when we can do it well, as in the case of (Seattle based design firm) Modern Dog, for example, which has done some of our most hilarious stuff (including "Less Kill More Bill" and "Get Lucky"), you get a lot more bang for it'.

Modern, post-Modern, and cheeky typography is this the next new wave? The fact is much of Blue Q's aesthetic falls somewhere between the retro- and grunge typographic styles. But I was curious whether Nash saw qualitative distinctions even within his own wares. Did he think of them as high-end or low-end cheekiness? 'It is all quick concepts with a quality execution', he explains. 'The retailers who buy our stuff wont put up with bad gum or a bar of soap with cheap fragrance. So we have to over-deliver a bit', he says, 'It ain't Estee Lauder but we aren't the local drugstore gift shop either'. But since Blue Q is a company that must sell wares to survive, does he test the products in any way – like the mainstream branding firms do? 'No', says Nash without hesitation. 'If my brother's into it, it sells. He's an engineer, very, out of the box but still very logical, really smart seeing instantly what will work. Or not'.

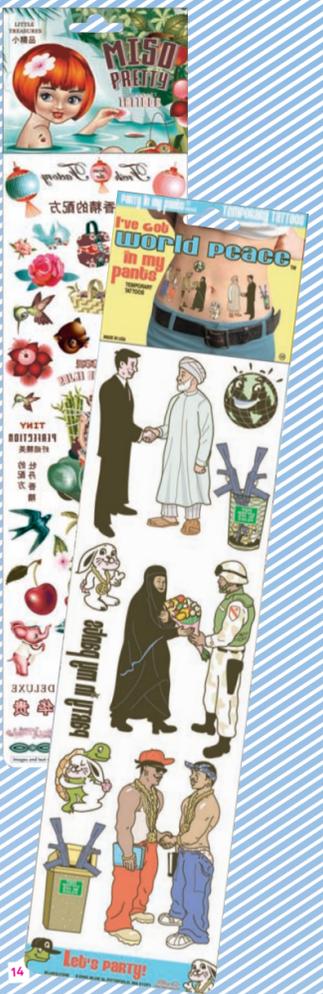
So by now, I was wondering what has been the most successful of the Blue Q products both in terms of numbers and buzz – and what success means to a small company? The answer: 'Dirty Girl' has been the biggest with almost \$20 million sold of that brand over the past seven years. And is this attributable to the sketchy brush portrait of a girl composed over hand scrawled lettering? 'The brand name's pretty snappy! Not the design', says Nash. But at the time the product was launched, 'it was very spot-on. Retro-Parisian, very simple to suss up, flirty, and the copywriting is not too linear. It's got an artsy mood. The illustrations of the character show the designer/illustrator's understanding of the human body. The limbs work well; she gesticulates like Vanna White (the American TV hostess for "Wheel of Fortune")'.

While some of Blue Q's design concepts are dictated by Nash, he allows for various design methodologies: Seattle's Modern Dog are really 'fast and furious' and go for a quick gag. Then there are those who use finesse, like Haley Johnson, who has done 'Sins', 'Bitch', 'Dirty Girl', 'Get Real', 'Hot & Flashy'. Recently, the London and New York ad agency Mother

has been brought on to treat products like ads, including 'Joint' candy in a box that has a joint on it. Other contributors include, Michel Casarramona ('Joy Stick'), Roy Fox ('Bird Shopper'), Methane Studios ('Cubical'), Buttery Smooth ('Most Tattoos'), and Louise Fili ('People Candy'). 'It's that combined mish mash that makes Blue Q strong', says Nash proudly.

The real trick behind the design of Blue Q products is, however, knowing how to write and work with writers. 'Alex Isley who used to work with Tibor Kalman taught me a lot about how design is really writing', says Nash. 'Blue Q is really a writing exercise'. Nash further notes that illustration and writing together is the ultimate. 'I love a designer who can illustrate because it triples the chances of what you can do. Though it is also fun teaming an illustrator and a designer. Also I like the designers who let me be a baker in the cake. I am happy to receive art that is ready to go to the printer; hey I can go home earlier! But I still feel that I am in charge of editing a certain curious voice. I like being cute and clever in a certain way, and more often than not I am talking to the creator about tweaks to make it tighter'.

Yet after all is said (and done), Blue Q creates novelty, and novelty – even the cleverest – is not essential. So I asked Nash how he feels about adding more clutter to the world. 'There is the saying that 'the most beautiful things are always the most useless', like peacocks and lilies for instance, and our customers have no use for merely good, beautiful stuff. I would love to make things that are more pure art but that is not our core retail customer'. So what would he like to make that he has not? 'Something with giant eels. Just kidding. I am working with independent artists more. Rather than building a package, being more organic'. Now Nash is taking Blue Q into the literary realm with a series of tiny books, sold in countertop displays, on a broad range of weird and wonderful themes – like 'The Holy Bible', an exploration into what the bible would be like if not for a good copy-editor, and 'Sleep' a collection of photographs of people, yes, sleeping. Maybe cheeky typography has come and gone, and the age of the post-cheeky book has arrived.



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