

david butler

DAVID BUTLER, VICE PRESIDENT OF DESIGN, COCA-COLA

Interview by Steven Heller



Aluminum contour Coke bottle.
DESIGN FIRM: Turner Duckworth.

In late 2004, the corporate leaders of Coca-Cola hired David Butler to fill a newly created position—vice president of design. Butler says that he was skeptical at first about joining an established institution where design change has been incremental. What pushed him to take the job, however, was the potential to make the biggest, most valuable brand on the planet a design-driven enterprise. This past June, a redesign of the Coke logo by Turner Duckworth, an independent brand-identity firm hired by the company, won the first-ever Design Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions advertising festival, as well as a Gold Lion for its refashioning of Coke's iconic bottle into aluminum.

Beginning in 1988, Butler spent a decade working for several Atlanta-based graphic design firms, including Melia Design Group and Iconologic, creating large-scale identity, packaging, and print communication systems for such companies as Delta Airlines, AT&T, Cartoon Network, and NGOs such as the International Olympic Committee. He was the principal founder of Process 1234 and went on to work for Clement Mok's Studio Archetype before it was acquired by Sapient. Along the way, he taught postgraduate courses in design history and theory.

We caught up with Butler on one of his frequent whirlwind trips between Atlanta and Coca-Cola offices around the world to ask him about Coke's global design strategy.

HELLER: I can't think of another global brand that is as ubiquitous as Coke. What is your responsibility to and for the brand?

BUTLER: My responsibility is to help our company leverage design to create a competitive advantage for our brands. When you consider that we have more than 400 brands in 200 countries, sell 1.5 billion packages a day, have more than 15 million coolers and vending machines on the street, and have more trucks than UPS, DHL, and FedEx combined, the opportunity for design is enormous. **HELLER:** Can you tell me something about your new design team? **BUTLER:** During the past four years we've been able to assemble an amazing team of close to 60 designers from around the world in design centers throughout Asia, Europe, and the U.S. In addition to our internal team, we have the pleasure of working with some of the best designers in the world, including Yves Béhar, Bruce Mau, and David Rockwell. **HELLER:** Béhar, Mau, and Rockwell—that's pretty impressive. What do they bring to such an established brand? **BUTLER:** Along with others, they have contributed new thinking to help us deliver on several exciting design projects. For example, Yves Béhar and his team were behind our award-winning recycle bin, made from recycled PET [a type of plastic commonly used to make bottles]. **HELLER:** Many brands fall out of vogue after years of marketplace hegemony. But that hasn't happened with Coke. How do you maintain brand dominance through design? **BUTLER:** Design has a unique role in creating emotional and functional durability for brands. This is



Far left: Interactive vending machine. INDUSTRIAL DESIGN: The Coca-Cola Company Global Design Team; MOTION GRAPHICS/ INTERACTION DESIGN: Sapient. Left: Coke Olympics North America website. AGENCY: Studiocom.

DESIGN HAS A UNIQUE ROLE IN CREATING EMOTIONAL AND FUNCTIONAL DURABILITY FOR BRANDS. THIS IS CERTAINLY TRUE IN THE CASE OF COKE.

certainly true in the case of Coke, with its iconic branding elements—the famous Coke red, the signature white ribbon, the legendary script, and the classic contour bottle. We believe that the strength of our brands, the relevance of our innovation, and the impact we have on the planet are all intrinsically linked to design. **HELLER:** But how far can you push design from the familiar to the unfamiliar without compromising your, well, familiarity? **BUTLER:** The new package for brand Coke [that won a Gold Lion at Cannes] is one example. It's made out of aluminum but shaped like our contour bottle. We're able to take a very familiar shape and improve its ergonomics and functionality. If you consider the generic aluminum-can shape that it will be competing with, this is quite a surprising move. **HELLER:** What has been the most challenging design problem you've faced with the Coke brand? **BUTLER:** Actually, our scale is our biggest problem. A couple of questions keep me up at night. How do you build a new capability inside a company that has close to a million employees all around the world? How do you maintain a clear brand identity and drive innovation at the same time for an iconic brand like Coke? **HELLER:** That would keep me up at

night, too. Let's change the subject to something less stressful. Vending is key to soft drink sales. I still remember slipping a dime into a Coke machine that looked like a red refrigerator. What is the new vending apparatus going to look like? **BUTLER:** Our single-door cooler is the workhorse of our equipment line. We've redesigned it from the inside out to be more sustainable and highly differentiated—two things you wouldn't have said about a Coke machine in the past. And we're introducing a prototype for a new kind of vending machine "experience" in Beijing. Imagine a giant interactive touchscreen monitor in the middle of a beautiful box, with streaming video, audio, and motion detection—all new technologies that will hopefully reinvent a fairly passive experience. **HELLER:** Sounds like a major effort. **BUTLER:** What we are doing with our coolers and vending equipment really underscores our overall goals with design. Through design, we can communicate in a way that's relevant, make a positive impact on the planet, and also deliver a new brand experience related to drinking our beverages. **HELLER:** Is there a different strategy in the U.S. than in Europe or Asia or South America? How do you describe these shifts? **BUTLER:** Coke is

a fairly new brand in some parts of the world and very established in others. In some places, like China, where Coke is less than 30 years old, we have the challenge of creating familiarity with the brand. In other countries, like the U.K. or the U.S., we have the challenge of maintaining relevance. One of our design principles for Coca-Cola is to be utterly familiar yet continually surprising—essentially, remaining relevant and engaging to consumers while retaining what they have always loved about the brand. This helps us focus on building enduring equity for the brand, while ensuring that we also introduce some fresh, new elements. **HELLER:** How do you use design to compete? **BUTLER:** People today don't just appreciate good design—they expect it. Design has become so integral that we now have to define our competition in a much broader sense, beyond the large beverage companies you would traditionally expect. Good design helps us connect and communicate with people all over the world. It defines us in a way that is true to our brands, while differentiating us from the competition. Moving forward, it represents a significant opportunity for us and will continue to be a strong strategic focus in everything we do. ■