

THE HUB

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BRAND DESIGN

Times Infiniti

Nissan
vice president
Jan Thompson
on how a passion
for “vibrant design”
is driving a high-wire
revival of a formerly
faltering brand.

How has a change in design changed the way you think about marketing for Nissan and Infiniti?

Design extends to every aspect of our products. It's not just about the look of the cars, but also the art direction and how our campaigns are written. Everything we do is impacted by design. For Infiniti, in particular, we continuously challenge ourselves, and our agencies, to make sure that everything we do embodies what we call “vibrant design.”

What is “vibrant design”?

It's the soul of the Infiniti brand. Design informs every Infiniti product in terms of performance, intuitive technology and luxury.

We try to get that message into our marketing by using a single stylized brush stroke that conveys the lightness of the vehicle as well as its spirit and style. It's a Japanese art form, a kind of calligraphy, called *Shodo*.

It is not just a visual design; it's all five senses coming together to create a more holistic design positioning. I can sit here in the morning and I can tell that an Infiniti FX35 just pulled into the parking lot.

This total design platform is our strength and it distinguishes our brand in the luxury segment. When you can hear it, and not even have to look at it to recognize it, that's pretty powerful.

What exactly does your design say to consumers that really separates your cars from the pack?

It's the passion for design that's at the heart of every Infiniti product; it's the ultimate expression of our brand. That passion is conveyed through the vehicle so that there's a real emotional aspect to our brand. It's not just another car. It conveys the spirit and style of the vehicle. There's a lot of emotional conveyance that comes through the product to the consumers.

Is there a difference in the message for a Nissan versus an Infiniti?

While Infiniti very much hangs its hat on “vibrant design,” on the Nissan side, “performance” is the main pillar. Nissan is fun to drive and certainly its styling is important, too. They're similar in a way, but the luxury element is what really separates Infiniti from Nissan.

What gave you the confidence that these new and very different designs would be well received by consumers?

Consumers are saying, give us something different; give us something more.

When Carlos Ghosn came in as CEO, he didn't want the ordinary. He is a very passionate man, and he hired one of the top designers on the globe, Shiro Nakamura, who has a history of challenging the status quo.

The Infiniti FX35 is a perfect example of →



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← “no fear.” The idea was to show people we’re not afraid to do something different. When a company hangs its hat on design, all of a sudden it frees the designers to really go out there with it, and they’re doing that. And we’ve got a management team here that is really open to new kinds of design and style. Of course, we conduct clinics with consumers to get their opinions, too.

Is there something special about your consumers that dramatically separates them from other consumers?

Yes, and you see it in the research data from Strategic Vision, which tracks consumer opinion for the industry. Our drivers want cars that are “fun to drive.”

Even more than BMW drivers?

Well, let’s look at the data on purchase reasons, especially for Infiniti. Number one, for Infiniti, it’s “fun to drive” and number two is “well-made vehicle.” For BMW, “fun to drive” was second. BMW had “well-made vehicle” as number one. Number three for Infiniti was “exterior styling” and then you’ve got to jump down five more places for BMW to get to “exterior styling.”

BMW has also been daring with its exterior stylings.

That goes to show you how much of a double-edged sword it is when you push the envelope. It can be accepted or rejected. The testing we do with consumers is important, and so far, so good. We’ve had great luck with the styling and design.

But there does seem to be a little bit of a love-it or hate-it with your cars, too. Are the designs intended to be polarizing?

That’s just the outcome of design. That’s the risk when you break out of the pack and say that you’re not going to make an ordinary vehicle. When you’re in a challenger role, like Nissan is — and certainly like we were in 1999 — you’ve got to come out swinging, and you can’t come out swinging with something that’s vanilla. You need Neapolitan.

You’ve got to take that calculated risk — not go too far — but take that calculated risk and get people to look at you. It helps the marketing, too. When we’ve got a beautiful vehicle, it makes my job, as a marketer, a lot easier.

How have gas prices and environmental issues affected your design? Are the cars lighter, for example?

It’s more things like the addition of flexible fuel. We have that on the Nissan side with the Titan, and it will be coming out on the Armada. We’ll extend it to other models, as well. We also have a HEV (Hybrid Electric Vehicle) coming in the Altima. Alternative fuels are something we’re studying — fuel cells, ethanol, diesel, new hybrid systems.

Would that affect the styling?

Probably, to some extent, depending on how we accommodate some of the new technology. But I can’t comment on that today.

What’s the relevance of a project like the Pivo relative to the future of design at Nissan? (see sidebar)

It’s to demonstrate what’s possible. Everyone falls in love with the Pivo. It’s the opportunity for the styling and design people — and the engineering — to show where Nissan is going and how we think. Same is true with the Urge. In that case, Nissan Design hooked up with kids online to tap into what they really want in a car. We built the Urge as a concept car and kids just went nuts over it at the North American International Auto Show. It’s a great statement for the brand and the company.

What do you learn from the student design contests that Nissan runs?

It keeps everybody sharp. There’s no question about that. When you get young people with their perspective on things, coming from their world, they challenge conventional thinking and spark ideas that we never would have thought of. We also get to see who the up-and-coming stars are and maybe get them in line with Nissan’s thinking — show them how cool we are so they consider maybe having a career at Nissan when they get out of school.

You have a program called Infiniti in Black, for African-American consumers. What’s the thinking there?

“Infiniti in Black” created a very sensitive, wonderful, portrayal of artistic expression of the African-American community. African-Americans are a very important market

Meet the Pivo

Looking “like a cross between a golf cart and an egg timer,” the Pivo, a concept car from Nissan, uses electricity to challenge assumptions about automotive design, reports Jathon Sapsford in *The Wall Street Journal*. That “the driver must always look out one side” is the most notable assumption attacked by the car’s design. With the Pivo, the driver sits not on the left or the right, but in the middle, with a passenger on each side.

That arrangement works because the Pivo’s “round, glass passenger cabin... twirls around like a gunner’s turret atop a World War II-era bomber.” What that means is that “a driver who went forward into a parking space wouldn’t have to back out, but would merely turn the cabin around instead and drive straight out.”

In addition, the driver doesn’t “necessarily have to face the same direction as



any of the wheels.” As noted by *Gizmag*: “Because the platform has a longitudinally symmetrical design, the driver’s perception of the car’s corners does not change even when the cabin is rotated 180 degrees.” In addition to enabling the pivoting cabin, the Pivo also replaces “mechanical linkages with electronic signals” for steering, braking and shifting, reports *Gizmag*. The result is “more flexibility in the layout of these functions because they are “no longer governed by mechanical linkages.”

An “around view monitor” meanwhile “generates a 360-degree view of the car’s surroundings on a dashboard monitor,” while a “dash-mounted infrared commander allows drivers to operate the navigation system and audio system without taking an eye off the road or fumbling around for controls.” Of course, the Pivo only goes about 50 mph, but it is really designed for city driving only. But that’s somewhat beside the point.

As Nissan designer Masato Inoue told the *Journal*: “Battery costs are falling, while power is improving... As cars use more and more electricity, it opens up new possibilities.” Alas, to own a Pivo is one possibility that’s not yet in the offing. Nissan currently has no plans to produce it for the mass market.

—Tim Manners, *Cool News of the Day*, *Reveries.com* (11/30/05)

for us. On the Nissan side, African-Americans account for just over nine percent of our total sales. Nobody else — Toyota, Mazda, Honda — even breaks five percent. On the Infiniti side, African-Americans account for five percent of total sales. Mercedes tops us, but nobody else is even close — Lexus or Acura.

So, African-Americans are extremely important to us, particularly on the Infiniti side, where we wanted a new way to reach out. We didn’t want just the traditional kinds of advertising. We wanted to look at the arts — at inspirational people, people who are driven by design and artistic expression.

We were just blown away by the response we got from the African-American community — so much so that we’re going to expand “Infiniti in Black” this year.

How about for women — how are you making the car-buying experience better for women?

We’ve got some initiatives in the works that we’re going to be testing later this

year that I can’t talk about yet. Infiniti is very heavily male-skewed; we’ve been successful there, and certainly don’t want to lose the guys! Infiniti is 64-percent male and nobody else is close to that. Part of that is a function of the vehicles themselves, in that they are very aggressively styled, and the interiors maybe are not as highly styled as the exteriors.

Females like interiors. Guys are more into the exterior and women really demand the nicer interiors. We’re picking up more females with the new M last year, and you’re going to see that change with the G sedan coming out this fall, too. So, we have a real opportunity, product-wise, to pick up more women in the franchise. Certainly our marketing will reach out more to females. We’ll be skewing just as much into more female — professional female — types of media outlets.

How about the buying experience itself?

Infiniti’s always been rated very high in that regard. Customer satisfaction has always been a strength of this brand. One

of the things the sales guys are working on is continually enhancing this total ownership experience that we have. Continuous improvement is part of their mantra. We’re never going to be satisfied; we’re going to continue to try to enhance the dealership experience, although it is very good as it is.

Did this new design strategy require any special organizational changes?

It did as far as Mr. Ghosn coming in and hiring Shiro. Nissan Design in La Jolla reports into Shiro, who now has the added responsibility of brand management. That was one of the major organizational moves that we made, just on the product side. Shiro is charged with making the product come to life. He is a very artistic man: He plays the saxophone, Herbie Hancock is one of his pals and he jams at night. His artistry comes through in the products that he green-lights and the products that he helps design.

Has the marketing department itself changed?

It has with the integration of the →

← whole interactive piece — interactive used to be in a different building, and had different budgets. They weren't part of the marketing department, as such. Now they're totally integrated into the marketing group, and our traditional media department is now falling under the interactive group.

Having the interactive people look at the media plans challenges our agencies and challenges us, too. It won't be business-as-usual. Plus, our business intelligence department reports into interactive, and they look at metrics — at what's working and what isn't working. They move quickly. The interactive people have a different mindset and that's what the industry needs.

You've been very critical of the marketing industry with respect to using new media.

We spend way too much money supporting what we're comfortable with. We do push a little bit here and there, but it's always as a tactic or an aside instead of really trying to understand where our customers are and the best ways to reach them.

There are no easy answers today and it requires a lot more work on the part of both the clients and the agencies. It just isn't easy anymore. It's not just about 30-second TV spots and print ads anymore.

What does Nissan understand about marketing cars that is lost on its competitors?

We've done a lot of work to understand who our customers really are and how they want to receive information about vehicles. You can bombard and carpet-bomb them, but it costs so much money to do that on network TV. It's not that TV is not important or that we're not going to continue to use TV.

But how do you use all of these other new media and really integrate them to reach people better and give them the right message at the right place at the right time? In the final analysis, it should save us a lot of money because we're really just speaking to the people who want to know about Nissan or Infiniti and people who are in the market to buy cars.

The internet lets us do that, because we know where the people are. They are shopping online — they're looking online and they're researching online. There are a

variety of messages you could give people at all different places using the new media.

There are a lot of things we need to learn, but consumers are calling the shots these days, not us. The idea of "push" marketing is old fashioned. It has got to be "pull." Consumers have to open the door for you.

What are you doing to help them open that door?

We're trying a lot of different things. With all of the launches coming up this fall (we've got five Nissan models and the G35 on the Infiniti side) we're really tasking our agencies and ourselves to come up with something that makes sense — and not just lead with the TV.

I don't mean to just call out TV, but we need to let go of the idea of always leading with traditional media, and if we've got some money left over throwing in a couple of tactics to make it look like we're using new media. It's got to be designed from the ground up. That's what we're trying to do with all these new launches.

Is there anything you've done in the past that worked particularly well online?

We've tested some things in the past online. We've got a business intelligence group with mathematicians and statisticians. Google is a math equation. That's what Google is all about; it's an algorithm. They really help you find people who are reading an article on the Nissan GTR, for example, and to make sure that a text message shows up on that page that offers more information on the GTR. It's contextual text messaging; it's not just search.

Have you partnered with Google?

We've just strengthened our relationship with all three portals. We're beta-testing something with MSN for our dealers. We're going to take our dealers up to Microsoft in Richmond and let them look at their new Vista platform. We want to see how can we use some of their tools to help our dealers market locally in their respective communities. We're just trying to find and use as much as we can and be at the forefront. Basically, we have to find new ways to reach our customers and stop wasting money.

Your sales recently took a hit. What's the plan to pull out of that and how does design fit into that plan?

Design figures into every single model that we're launching. The Quest was re-designed from the inside out. The Maxima interior was totally re-designed and it is just opulent; it's just gorgeous. The Versa is an entry-level car in the U.S., but it was a luxury car in Japan. So, it's got more space, and a beautiful interior. We're going to kill the competition with that one.

So far the "buff books" have put us right up at the top in tests — and that's with a prototype vehicle. The G35 — it's a killer. It's just a killer. The Altima is a home run in consumer testing. As far as the sales decline, it wasn't really too unexpected because our product launches are all in the second half of the year. We're looking for a very robust second half and a positive year overall.

What is the hardest thing about making so big a change in the brand identity?

The hardest part probably is just communicating the new identity to consumers, because for years they built an impression about you, and changing that impression takes time. Vehicle by vehicle, campaign by campaign, you slowly change people's opinions of a brand. Sometimes it takes decades. If you want to change, you have to be consistent, or you'll lose your consumers. And you've got to be patient. ■

Jan Thompson is vice president of marketing at Nissan North America, Inc., where she oversees the development and execution of product marketing campaigns and promotions for Nissan and Infiniti.

Jan joined Nissan in June 2004 from The Designory, an Omnicom-owned marketing services agency, where she served as president and CEO for five years. Previously, she was a vice president of Callaway Golf and general manager of Wilson Golf.

She began her career at Chrysler Corp., where she held a series of field sales positions. Later, Jan was national marketing manager for Lexus Division of Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., and vice president of marketing and vice president of sales operations at Mazda Motor of America.