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They say nostalgia isn't what it used to be, but it's a time-served element in many a successful brand – and e-liquid companies have found it a useful tool to create an image.

Take the homely Granny's Pie line, from the US-based Tasty Flavors. The brightly coloured packaging features a cartoon elderly woman who lovingly offers out a slice of pie. The range of flavours (Apple Crisp, Strawberry Pie and Lemon Tart) work well with the theme, conjuring feelings of warmth and happiness.

The animated grandma and the garishly trippy background suggest Tasty Flavors rely on evoking a sense of security associated with an imaginary matriarchal figure. Alluding to your own grandmother, who might not approve of smoking or with whom you might have a poor relationship, could backfire. Evoking a fictional past – or a past fiction – may be a safer bet.

For Stewart Hodgson, director of London-based creative agency Fabrik Brands, Granny's Pie's success depends on its audience.

"The first rule of branding is to stand out from the competition, unless there's a good reason to fit in," he says. "If this concept defines clear space for the products then it's a good approach. As for whether it successfully fires up nostalgia in the target audience, it depends on whether they make the connection, or not."

In the early stages of creating a new brand, the line between a stand-out design and an image that can easily be misinterpreted may be incredibly thin. For Hodgson, being able to lock on to what makes your brand different can help avoid these pitfalls.



“Once you have this clear in your mind, working out how it connects with your target audience becomes a lot simpler,” he says.

Deep in cultural memory

Riot Labs’ new brand Punk Grenade is a gritty take on the 1970s punk era, based on the bullet design and strawberry lemonade Pink Grenade flavour made popular by core brand Riot Squad. For Riot Labs, based in Milton Keynes, UK, it took a journey of experimentation to come back to its roots.

Brand manager Emily Manson says: “We launched other brands previously and we went down a completely different route, putting it in different bottles and trying to make it its own individual brand, like the British Bread and Butter Pudding Party [another Riot Labs brand].

“We found that’s not what the customer wants. The customer loves Riot Squad. We just needed to play on that original brand and give it its own identity and that’s where the punk came in.”

Encased in a lurid pink bullet-shaped case with DIY punk-style design, the brand is a sequel to Riot Squad and harks back to a time lodged deep in British cultural memory. The fruit-based flavours all have a hint of lemonade fizz, like the popular Pink Grenade flavour that inspired the new brand.

“We know that we’ve done the right thing in bringing the core lemonade fizz into all the different flavours because that’s the part people love,” Manson adds.

But do you like the music?

At expos, Riot Labs plan to play classic punk songs while “punks” in full retro regalia skulk around their booth. These reference points, however, only flirt casually with the past, stopping short of diving headfirst into full-on nostalgia.

“There’s a certain coolness around punk, but a lot of people don’t like punk music,” says Manson. “Everybody grew up knowing punk, so that’s why we based the branding around it. We’re not aiming our brand just towards punks. It’s more that we wanted to make it individual and different.”

Finding ways to reimagine rather than recreate the past as Punk Grenade has done is a useful approach to nostalgic design, as Fabrik Brands’ Hodgson explains: “Nostalgia taps into a sense of familiarity in an existing audience, but it doesn’t simply copy and paste a product from the past. Brands that make nostalgic references are still unique because there are other points to define and distinguish them.”



Employing a niche reference can lure new customers. The UK’s SVC Labs found its niche in a typical ending to a night out – the brightly coloured, humorous brand Chicken Shop e-liquid, with its unique flavour profile.

The imagined order of fried chicken can be served with Cluckin’ Hot Sauce, followed by Deep Fried Jam Donut, while the lemon wipes used after a meal are presented in the form of the Lemon Refresh flavour.

SVC Labs managing director Christian Sanderson says the brand is a tongue-in-cheek reference to his own past. “In my group of friends, you’re not a South Londoner if you’ve not been to a South London chicken shop,” he says. “Hopefully it resonates with childhood memories of popping to the chicken shop.”

The concept was a bold move, but for Sanderson it was all about selling the story to the consumer. “Everyone asks, ‘does it taste like chicken?’,” he says. “When people understand the flavours, our brand story and our marketing packs people get the concept.”

Victorian values

Other brands hark back further. Adam Hill, creative director of design studio Creativehill, says he has seen a rise in Victorian-influenced design in the lifestyle industry. “Everyone wants that timeless feeling that we’ve been here since the 1800s, even though we haven’t,” he says.



A prime example is Totally Wicked's brand Mr Chadwick's Artisan E-liquid. The stern, top-hatted, bespectacled gentleman on the label suggests luxury, while the flavours – including Chocolate Limes, Black Jack and Fruit Pips – recall the traditional sweets of an earlier period. A period some high-street sweetshops have also taken to reinventing.

Employing nostalgia can clearly be useful – but to know which era and style to reference you must first understand your brand and your target audience. The age range of your customer base will guide you as Hodgson explains.

“Talk to the millennials on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and they'll wax poetic about the '90s and all the ways you know you're a '90s kid. Talk to someone a little older, and you're sure to hear tales about the '80s, the '70s, and the '60s.”

At a time when the e-cigarette industry must be seen to be careful not to encourage young people to smoke, avoiding key millennial nostalgia motifs can help a brand steer away from accusations of appealing to the youth market.



The US company Element was well aware of this issue was creating its Tonix brand, a twist on its popular “scientific” brand. In its design, with old-fashioned brown bottle and western style fonts, the branding pays homage to American pharmacies of the 1800s – suggesting to the user that the brand is sophisticated and traditional. Importantly, it references a period that does not necessarily strike a chord with the young.

Coca-Cola kids

Tonix's flavour profile includes American Apple Pie, and PB and Blueberry Jam – sweet, dessert flavours that some in the industry worry attract young people. David Botton, CEO of Element, does not see the connection. "We don't believe that any type of flavouring is advertising to children, unless someone can show me something that only children eat," he says.

And, of course, there are other potential pitfalls in establishing any recognisable brand. What previously defined brands as leaders in a crowded market could quickly make them stand out for the wrong reasons if the theme becomes bigger than the brand's overall aim.

For Hodgson it's all about deciding on a theme that works with everything else you have. "Don't just pick a nostalgic theme because you like it," he says. "Ask yourself how it fits with your image, your tone of voice, and the things you stand for as a company."

Botton believes branding should "open people's eyes" but once it has succeeded the consumer will not consider the branding so much.

"I think there was probably a time when the design of Coca-Cola bottles meant something," he says. "I think we're past that point with Coca-Cola now."

"We're dealing with a consumable product, so branding is a way to get yourself noticed. But if you want to have a successful product it's all about retention and the core product itself."

Any brand could, in theory, become the Coca-Cola of the e-liquid industry. For that, they have to entice the consumer to spend money on their product over others. That takes quality, dedication as well as branding that makes a connection.

– Stephanie Phillips *ECigIntelligence contributing writer*

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