



LEADING WITH THE SUN

Larry Jaffee, Package Design magazine, August 22, 2016

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170223113118/http://www.packagedesignmag.com/content/leading-with-the-sun>

A product's utility and brand identity can vary immensely depending upon geography. Take, for example, off-the-grid rural villages in developing countries.

Patrick Walsh co-founded **Greenlight Planet** with the knowledge that 2 billion people in India, Africa and Asia were in need of low-cost solar lamps instead of widely used kerosene lamps that are dangerous to one's health or candles. Both can easily start fires.

In western cultures, a solar lamp also appeals to vacationing campers and the ecological-minded looking to reduce the carbon footprint.

“We hear about Americans who are going to go ‘extreme’ for seven days. They’re going to go ‘off-grid’. That extreme life is just normal for everybody else,” notes Melissa Lo, Greenlight Planet head of global marketing, in a phone call from Nairobi, Kenya.

“The majority of our consumers make two dollars a day. They save up to buy the [\$8] lamps so their kids can study at night,” Lo explains. In contrast, candles cost 5 cents a day. “That’s what they can afford. Some houses just go dark if they didn’t make enough money that day.”

In four years, Greenlight Planet has sold 1.6 million of its Sun King brand solar lights in 54 countries, which come in a half dozen varieties, including a personal lamp and a home system, which cost \$80 to \$110 and consist of three hanging lamps in different rooms.

Even in emerging markets, the brand name “Sun King” is understood in countries where English is not the native language because “both are really basic words that convey empires and royalty,” Lo says. The lion head logo and yellow resonates with these cultures. (Obviously, Disney with The Lion King reached the same conclusion.)

From a branding perspective, the messaging needed to clearly communicate the product’s benefits for both groups of intended buyers: Americans and emerging markets.

Although its products are available to be purchased online in the U.S. via Amazon, domestic retail distribution is not a priority for Greenlight Planet. “It does help to get our name out, but our main and primary goal is to reach off-grid emerging market consumers where the rest of the world lives,” Lo explains. “That’s our first and foremost consumer base.”

Lo says it’s interesting to tell Sun King’s branding story through western-oriented viewpoints. Rest of world packaging now looks fairly similar to U.S. packaging, which like the product itself is manufactured in China.

Packaging copy tells the company’s humanitarian mission. Specific, graphic icons convey the product’s rodent-proof wires. Another shows the equivalent number of candles that would create the amount of light that the solar lamp emits.

In emerging markets, Greenlight Planet sells Direct-to-Village (DTV) and Retail, which includes “traditional” retail and “modern” retail akin to big-box U.S. chains like Best Buy with store shelves. Traditional retail consists of tiny market shops made out of wood similar to a vegetable stand. “That’s the majority of our retail presence,” explains Lo.

Greenlight Planet's distribution in emerging markets relies on DTV representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and micro-financial institutions (MFIs), totaling a few thousand sales agents in the fields, sometimes literally.

NGOs and MFIs are becoming the largest distribution networks into rural and off-grid communities. Through them, Greenlight Planet is able to reach places, Lo describes as "eight hours from nearest civilization." The durable product is manufactured to withstand the elements, such as monsoons.

Brigade, a 10-year-old design and branding agency based in the U.S., was approached in 2014 by Greenlight Planet to design a box and tell the company's product and story to the American consumer, according to Kirsten Modestow, Brigade founder and executive creative director.

The name Sun King and lion logo already existed. Brigade, which works with a lot of startups, came up with the headline "Transforming the World One Light at a Time," and wrote the supporting copy, as well as designed the box, with the U.S. market in mind. "We helped with a packaging assignment; we weren't a long-time agency of record helping with strategy," Modestow explains. "We handed it off, and they took it in-house."

Global supply chain logistics apparently then played a role in bringing the project to Process AG, which has a global network of factories, whose facilities range from manufacturing to packaging to distribution.

Process operates a printing factory in Dongguan, China, that assembles packaging for Greenlight Planet. The grade of cardboard is based on structural stability tests, which Greenlight handled internally. "It's usually more cost-effective for overseas packaging and emerging markets, so the savings are passed to the end consumer," says Thomas Lee, founder of Process AG.

"We do packaging for a lot of big-box and online retailers," he adds, citing Target, Best Buy, Costco, Apple and Amazon.

Process takes into consideration how a package looks on shelves in comparison to competing products from 10 ft., 5 ft. and 3 ft. Typically messaging, image or brand is the deciding factor in which box will be picked up.

Lee explains, "What controls your eye? Brighter colors? It's what we call landscape analysis. It's different from when you're shopping at a Nordstrom versus a Walmart, but even greater when you're talking about an emerging market. We have to understand the psyche of why these people are buying—and how they're buying—in Kenya, India, and China.

“In Kenya, for example, the product serves a utilitarian need. It’s a solution,” he continues. “Whereas here in the U.S., it’s an electronic accessory to camping bags or backyard and not something you have to have. When we design for something you have to have, it’s different than what you want to have. We have to educate the consumer and make that connection.”

In emerging markets, packaging decisions are “much more of an assisted sell,” Lee explains. “You’re possibly getting a one-on-one salesperson on the back of a horse or a small convenience store. They should know everything about the product, and we have to support who’s selling it and explain what the product does and solve.

Since Greenlight Planet’s founding by Walsh in a University of Illinois dorm room and work with the initial smart solar design with Mayank Sekhsaria and Anish Thakkar, users of Sun King products report fewer breathing problems caused by lighting needs (48%), increase in general safety afforded by effective nighttime illumination (94%), increases in time available for studying (75%), and even an increase in household income (25%). The brand also estimates that its products reduce 9 million tons of carbon dioxide pollution per year and have prevented more than 10,000 deadly house fires.

“For those living off the electric grid, kerosene, wood or coal-powered lighting are often considered the only options available but each of these come with notable health risks, not to mention detrimental impacts on the environment,” says Walsh. “By developing safe and affordable solar energy products, we aim to show remote communities that there are other options available so they can live brighter and more productive lives.” For its work, Greenlight Planet is garnering the world’s attention. The company has won several awards, including the 2016 Ashden International Award for Increasing Energy Access, supported by the Ikea Foundation.