

Deep Thoughts

Brand consultancy co-founder examines retail from both sides

Simon Graj

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It's been nearly 20 years since Simon Graj co-founded Graj + Gustavsen, a full-service strategic brand consultancy and "creative workshop" with his brother, Raymond, and Eric Gustavsen. Prior to that, Graj was a design director at The Gap. His broad and deep retail experience includes stints with small, regional retailers as well as time on the wholesale side, where he cultivated his firm's entrepreneurial principles.

Graj + Gustavsen's client portfolio includes Sears, Timberland, Carpet One, Saks Fifth Avenue, Levi's and Target. Its most recent project was the creation of Peter England PEOPLE, a new chain of hip, modern family stores being rolled out in India by the Madura Garments division of the Aditya Birla Nuvo Group.

A firm believer in giving back, Graj + Gustavsen established G+G Cares, which supports charities like Accion International, a micro lending and micro finance organization that fights poverty by providing credit and supporting economic and sustainable development.

Who's doing a good job with branding?

Coca-Cola and Polo are rather obvious, but I also think Urban Outfitters is another wonderful brand that's well managed.

Considering your work with retailers and brands, is it tough to remove your professional hat and revert to being a customer?

Not at all. When I walk into an environment, I'm like anybody else — I don't make judgments, I just have the experience. This morning I walked into Starbucks. I heard the music and it was actually [being played] on a good quality sound system and everyone had smiles on their faces. I got a piece of the good life and a \$5 cup of coffee.

What was your first retail job?

When I was 14, I worked in a shoe store and that provided a great deal of experience in allowing me to serve the customer.

Any life-long lessons learned there?

The main thing I learned was that you had to go through due diligence and not make judgments on who will buy and who will



not buy. I also worked on the floor of Hughes & Hatcher, which was sort of like the Barneys of the Midwest, and later became a buyer. There I learned the importance of SKUs, managing an inventory and really understanding merchandising. I realized you had to really make a compelling proposition and show the context of the product, not just the product. It's why I strongly believe context is the new content.

Who or what has had the greatest influence on your career?

The biggest influence was my family and continues to be. I'm a great admirer of my father, who was a tailor and worked 24/7. He made custom clothing for the Communist Party in Poland. And when we immigrated to this country for a better life and freedom, he continued his craft. So my whole sensibility comes from artists and craftsmanship.

There are my business partners ... [and] when I worked at The Gap, Mickey Drexler was a big influence because he was so authentic and detail-oriented.

What advice do you have for retailers?

Become better merchandise editors and become better storytellers by establishing context for the merchandise. Most stores are very, very confusing because they're driven by lots of inventory and end up looking like warehouses. And all the consumer really wants is to be helped, so retailers should assist them through clarity and context.

What other interests might you have pursued if you hadn't focused on retail?

At heart, I'm an artist. I love design and craftsmanship, so I know I'd be involved in some kind of art and design in a more pure way. I still do some sculpting. We work so much with our heads, so working with your hands is really wonderful because it offers another kind of connection.

Where do you find inspiration?

Quality workmanship.

What about rejuvenation?

I love to rise early and meditate. I've done that for the past 30 years and I recommend it to anyone and everyone.

STORES
-Janet Groeber