A Method to the Creative Madness:
From chore to experience, a cleaning brand’s meteoric rise to fame

by Sonja Gugajew

Abstract

In today’s crowded marketplace of price wars, increasing costs and cut-throat competition, the cost of marketing is high indeed. Increasing pressure is being put on creative capital to break through the clutter. By offering a truly unique product experience communicated through an unorthodox marketing campaign, a small cleaning brand is using its creative clout to stand out. This article analyzes how Method Products Inc. is winning consumers’ hearts and minds through innovative design, a genuine do good philosophy and an integrated marketing communications approach. Method Products Inc. is daring to be different and having fun doing it.

With a burgeoning array of choices in the marketplace, an equally dizzying cacophony of noise in the media, rapidly declining attention spans, and resulting consumer apathy, it is no wonder why some have boldly proclaimed that branding is dead. How can brands compete when investing millions of dollars in advertising mediocre products with fierce competition no longer guarantees success?

Take the fragmented cleaning industry: a relatively flat $18 billion category dominated by giants like Procter & Gamble, Clorox and SC Johnson. For an upstart brand like Method Products Inc., carving out a presence in the commoditized and traditional household-cleaning-product business was a tall order. Armed with creativity, consumer insight and an innovative product offering, however, Method Products introduces disruption in everything it does. To Method, disruption means remarkable in every aspect of its product experience: from eye-catching, minimalist packaging presented through innovative merchandising, to a genuine non-toxic philosophy communicated through irreverently fun advertising.

By combining these elements
into an integrated marketing communications message focused around a philosophy of cool, environmentally guilt-free cleaning, Method has created an emotional connection with a growing cult-following of customers. It has managed to do so while becoming what Inc. magazine names the seventh-fastest-growing private company in the U.S. Who knew soap could be this fun?

More Than Just Cleaning: Tapping the “Progressive Domestics”

In a category replete with price wars, “new and improved” stain removal claims and aggressive disinfectant messages, Method knew from the start that it could not compete on price and efficacy alone. For Method to succeed in this category, it had to do what no other brand had done before: re-invent the category by elevating the chore of cleaning into a fun, healthy experience. Fittingly, this insight came from two housemates who hated cleaning their house. With Eric Ryan’s advertising background and Adam Lowry’s chemical engineering and environmental science expertise, the co-founders were a perfect duo to revolutionize the cleaning industry.

From his marketing experience at such companies as General Motors, Ryan knew that advertising alone could not metamorphose an average commodity product into something greater. From his experience with Saturn’s design studio, he also learned about the power of design to capture consumers’ imaginations and transform a stagnant category. “We were trying to solve the brand’s problems through advertising, but the product experience was extremely flawed,” Ryan told Advertising Age’s Point magazine. “I felt the skills of account planning—being very consumer-centric, using consumers to look forward, not back—would be an amazing way to build a culture and company that could go around more traditional companies.”

By using this consumer-centric approach, Method discovered their target audience: a higher-end, educated group of consumers they coined the “Progressive Domestics.” Unlike the housewife generation that preceded them, these modern consumers lead busy and active lives, experiment with many brands, and are increasingly health conscious and environmentally minded. They do not proclaim to be domestic goddesses, nor are they determined to obliterate every last trace of dirt. Cleaning no longer defines their identity; it plays only one part in their home design aesthetic.

The key is the emotional connection these consumers feel with their homes. Ryan explained to the San Francisco Chronicle, “Your house is this high-interest, high-emotion place, but the products people used for it were just commodities. We were the first to treat cleaning as cool. The category treats it as a chore, and to a lot of people it is a chore—but it’s also therapeutic, ritualistic, and has a sense of purpose to it.” The products are also non-toxic, which is especially appealing to the health-conscious Method consumer. With Method products, consumers can ensure the safety of the home environment for themselves and their families without compromising their sense of style.

The idea of imbuing the chore of cleaning with a spoonful of sugar was refreshing. Ryan likens Method’s quest to reinvent cleaning to Nike’s inspirational treatment of jogging: both transform traditionally unpleasant “chores” into meaningful consumer experiences. Method strives to create a premium cleaning experience that connects to the emotion and pride with which consumers regard their home. In doing so, Method has transcended the functional language that is predominant in the cleaning industry and realized the increasing importance for a brand to forge long-lasting emotional connections with its consumers. Un-

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understanding the psychology and aspirations of the Method consumers was the first step. Figuring out how to motivate them was the second.

The Makings of a Disruptive Brand: Creating a Unique Consumer Experience

What makes Method so appealing to its core audience? The disruptiveremarkability that it brings to every aspect of the product experience has a lot to do with it. Method’s design elevates cleaning into an art form; the sensory nature of the products stimulates the imagination via sight and smell. Method’s vase-like packaging offers the elegant design, from the bowling-pin shaped dish soap to the figure-eight shaped laundry bottle to the teardrop shaped hand wash. Aesthetically pleasing to the eye, these products do not belong in cupboards or underneath sinks. They are meant to be displayed on kitchen or bathroom countertops where they can complement the personality of a well-groomed home. Method’s design creates value for the brand: it provides a premium experience for the consumer who appreciates the combination of elegant design and day-to-day functionality. In addition, the design becomes an advertising platform in and of itself, a banner of what the brand represents in magazines, on the shelf, or in the home.

The genius behind many of Method’s original designs is Karim Rashid, a preeminent designer with a knack for bringing high-end designs to commodity products such as waste baskets. “The cleaning product industry is very backward, and many of the products have a 1950s language,” Rashid wrote in an e-mail to the San Francisco Chronicle. “They are cluttered with graphics, too much information and complicated ugly forms. My intention was to develop holistic design language for a holistic brand. Clean, simple, neat, understated, and designed to really perform in our contemporary technological age.” Method now boasts its own in-house team of design talent, a powerhouse of creativity and innovative packaging ideas.

The stylish, transparent bottles reveal a variety of luminous colors that add to their sensual experience. The colors match premium fragrances such as lavender lemongrass and grapefruit pear, which are another element of Method’s disruptiveness. Method’s philosophy: Why should you have to don gloves, masks, and an armament of protection in the act of caring for your home? Why not recreate a spa experience in your bathroom with eucalyptus, mint-scented bathroom products?

People typically discover Method because of the design, love using it because of the fragrance, then discover it’s good for you. It’s that third piece that drives loyalty. It’s easy to copy design, the fragrance, the attitude, but you can’t copy the philosophy.

The fragrance becomes an integral part of the Method cleaning experience—one that is pleasant, smart and worthy of the consumer’s own home.

Besides Method’s designs and premium fragrances, the third disruptive element is its non-toxic, animal-friendly stance, giving Method added depth. While most cleaners emit toxic fumes, Method formulas are safe, biodegradable, recyclable, and, for the most part, naturally derived. “People typically discover Method because of the design, love using it because of the fragrance, then discover it’s good for you,” Ryan said. “It’s that third piece that drives loyalty. It’s easy to copy design, the fragrance, the attitude, but you can’t copy the philosophy.” Method’s philosophy of integrity dictates the products it launches. If Method can’t make a product work with a non-toxic bent, it won’t enter the segment.

In 2006 Method’s co-founders were named “Persons of the Year” by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in honor of their refusal to test any products on animals. During the same year, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) inducted Method into its Green Power Leadership Club because of Method’s purchase of enough green energy credits to offset its own energy use and carbon footprint. Its consumers know that Method is more than good looks and fragrance. They are attracted to its values. And while there are other environmentally friendly cleaners on the market, Method’s...
Method’s holistic philosophy makes for an interesting story, and people like to hear stories. From its packaging designs to its advertising campaigns, Method communicates its philosophy by regaling its audience with witty anecdotes that make honest, fun and wholesome references to both personal and shared touch points in consumers’ lives.

The same engaging storytelling littered the pages of Method’s People Against Dirty booklet, the result of a $2 million print advertising campaign during the summer of 2005. The 16-page booklet, dropped in magazines such as Real Simple, Organic Style and Lucky, celebrated Method’s natural philosophy through innocent pictures of men and women cleaning in the buff. On one page of the booklet, opposite a picture of a woman and child taking a bubble bath, reads the following Method words of wisdom:

“Where does your home end and you begin? You don’t literally have to answer that. We believe that a home is more than a box: It’s a sort of second skin. It could be a third skin, if you’re counting clothes.

Anyway, you wouldn’t spray your skin with something dangerous, but many people clean their tub with harsh chemicals and soak in it shortly thereafter. We’re against that. We develop non-toxic, health alternatives for use around children, pets and you. Method is easy on your home and you, because you’re linked.”

Besides a 10 percent to 15 percent instant lift in sales, the campaign generated a sizeable sales gain and hundreds of phone calls and e-mails.

In the summer of 2007, Method launched its biggest advertising campaign to date. The “Detox Your Home” campaign includes print and banner advertisements and a search engine marketing component. With colorful images such as a cherubic baby in a kitchen sink bath and a model of a detoxified home in a Method spray bottle, the new campaign is a call to action for health-conscious homeowners everywhere. And it certainly serves to call attention to Method as well, with carefully provocative but fun images. For example, an entwined pair of legs extending from behind a wall and a mop is captioned, “Make floor love, not floor war.” Likewise, a spray bottle of Method cleaner wrapped in a wrinkled brown bag is captioned, “Lay off the hard stuff.”

The common thread underlying all of its marketing communica-
tions is a very intimate feel expressed through human dialogue and experience. The result is a sincerity that is very difficult for larger, more traditional companies to emulate. Reading Method advertisements is not unlike listening to a friend. Method educates its audience about its philosophy while engaging them through storytelling.

**Disruptive Merchandising for a Lifestyle Brand**

Method’s holistic experience is also communicated in its unique merchandising strategy. In the cleaning product aisle of any Target store, consumers won’t find Method products sprinkled across disparate categories. Instead they stumble upon a presentation of Method products merchandised as a collection, just in case they haven’t already been drawn to Method’s banner effect of intriguing shapes and soft colors that glows out of the normally banal cleaning aisle.

The message that Method communicates in its neat rows of premium elegance is a system of clean, healthy living. These aesthetic statements introduce consumers to the Method experience and help them navigate through all of their homecare needs. The merchandising strategy encourages Method consumers to buy products across its range of different categories. Once converted to the Method philosophy, consumers seek out this store-within-a-store and use the system of Method products to care for their Method home.

Method took its merchandising concept to the next level in what it calls “pop-up” shops: temporary stores or kiosks that are stylistically consistent with the brand design and offer a complete collection of Method products. The first one was set up off of bustling Union Square in San Francisco. In the fall of 2006, another was set up in Los Angeles in conjunction with H.D. Buttercup, whose focus on high-end furniture and home design made for a perfect fit.

Method’s systemic approach to homecare lends itself well to packaged collection promotions, such as back-to-school caddies or holiday gift totes. With each themed kit, a story is built around the themed cleaning event, whether it’s returning to school or spicing up a friend’s life with holiday cheer. These stories are communicated on the packaging as well as in the premium design treatment, giving consumers a reason, or perhaps fulfilling a guilty pleasure, to bring the stories to life.

In the winter of 2006, Method launched a holiday-themed cross-platform promotion that included more than 15 holiday product launches across categories of cleaning, personal care and air care. An in-store display was designed around translucent cherry-red, mistletoe-green and ice-blue frosted bottles, which sparkled like holiday ornaments. The spiced pear,
frosted cranberry, and peppermint vanilla scented hand washes, all-purpose cleaners, air care sprays and candles lured consumers with the essence of holiday cheer and the prospect of a version of Method clean integrated into their homes’ seasonal celebration. The passion and excitement generated by the holiday promotion can be summed up by one consumer’s words:

“'To buy or not to buy,' was the question I asked myself for a whole half second when I spotted the Method Holiday goodies while shopping at Target. I instantly perked up and my heart beat faster. Yea, it’s pathetic that cleaning products excite me. Tantalizing titles of Frosted Cranberry, Spiced Pear and Peppermint Vanilla scents beckoned me closer. I seized the peppermint vanilla hand wash...Then gasp! I saw the matching air enhancers, aroma candles, aroma pills, and all-purpose cleaners…”

**Join the Revolution: Enlist to Fight Dirty!**

Method’s disruptive profile and consumer-centric marketing message make it buzz-worthy and fuel consumer-generated word-of-mouth marketing. While most companies outsource their public relations and consumer service centers, both of these play a critical role in Method’s marketing.

Thanks to a core public relations team, Method generates more than one billion impressions each year in placements such as *Cosmopolitan, Elle, Shape, Family Circle, O Magazine* and *Time*. It has been featured on television shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and CNBC’s *The Big Idea*, and has been written about in publications such as *Vanity Fair* and *The New York Times*. Method’s presence can be felt at such events as the San Francisco Green Festival and through partnerships with organizations such as Siemens, a washer and dryer manufacturer, and Mommy Track’d, a Web site that helps working mothers manage their lives. Through buzz-worthy public relations, Method interacts with its consumers in non-traditional but relevant ways.

In accordance with its consumer-centric focus, Method strives to make each consumer experience personal. Each e-mail and phone call is answered personally by a member of the marketing team. Thus consumer feedback is well integrated into Method’s marketing and product development efforts. “We get e-mails from women telling us that our products get their husbands and kids to clean,” said Jen Drubner, Method’s director of public relations, to the *Tri-Valley Herald*. “People have told us they have dinner parties just so they can use the products to clean up. Suddenly it’s cool to clean.”

A collection of e-mails, pictures and letters covers a bulletin board at Method’s corporate headquarters. The passion and excitement that surround the brand are evident in the Method parties that fans host, the stories they write, and the pictures they share of themselves posing with Method products.

From this flood of consumer e-mails, phone calls and letters, Method has developed an extensive consumer database that serves as a platform for testing new products, conducting informal surveys, and, most importantly, nurturing a brand ambassador program. Encouraged to “help fight dirty,” loyal fans are enlisted to incite the People Against Dirty revolution. Upon signing up, each ambassador is sent an advocacy kit with a Method t-shirt and five Method sample kits to pass along to friends and family. In addition advocates are sent new product updates and can post their personal profiles on Method’s interactive Web site.

With the same premium look and feel as its products, Method’s Web site is another personal connection to its advocates. It puts a human face to the brand. For example, candid face shots of actual Method employees flash opposite its “manifesto” online. The Web site also offers an online store, e-cards to send to friends, a forum to ask questions and a People Against Dirty blog with tips on how to live clean. Through these activities, Method embraces its consumers and invites them to participate in its experience. The brand ultimately depends on its core group of loyal fans to spread the word about its mission and philosophy.

**Living the Brand: Innovation From a New Creative Class**

In the current information age, brands that wield creativity and innovation to break through the clutter will ultimately capture imaginations and win heart and mind share. At Method, creativity is more than just a buzzword; it’s a tenet to live by. From its hip, open-spaced office décor to its chic, minimalist designer products, Method exudes creativity inside and out. Method’s headquarters are comparable to a modern art gallery, with clean white space and products placed on lit pedestals. Past the lobby is an open layout of long, wide tables in place of cubicles. There is no private space at Method. Instead, everything is shared just as freely as the newly generated ideas that are excitedly exchanged in this charged atmosphere. It’s an open culture where debate is encouraged, new ideas are embraced and words are not minced. There’s energy at Method, and the company’s passionate employees are brimming with it. Constantly innovating, without fear of taking risks and challenging conventional thinking, Method employees represent a new entrepreneurial, creative class.

The fast-paced office environment is testament to the two to three
product lines Method launches each year. This rapid to-market speed gives Method an advantage over larger and more traditional companies. Method’s most recent revolutions include: a reusable performance-enhancing microfiber line; an eco-friendly, ergonomic convenience cleaning line called “omop;” and a naturally derived, mood-enhancing line of personal care products called “bloq.” Part of the ability to launch such a prolific stream of creative products comes from Method’s choice to outsource most of the ponderous overhead associated with new launches to more than 50 manufacturers. Method’s speed-to-market strategy allows it to be nimble and ever-changing, learning from new products and scrapping mediocre ones based on experience. Thus Method can quickly adapt to consumer trends in a constant trial-and-error process of innovation.

Conclusion: Cleaning up the Category

The result is a rapidly growing company that is a product of its own creativity. According to Felicia McClain, a research analyst with Mintel International Group, Method went from revenues of $156,000 in 2002 (one year after its launch), to $3.4 million in 2003. Market research firm Kline & Company estimated Method’s sales at $85 million in 2006. According to Inc. magazine, Method has experienced a growth of 3390 percent in the last three years. In addition, Method’s growth outstrips its competition in each of its categories year after year. For example, according to Information Resources Inc., 2006 sales of Method dishwashers grew 28.5 percent over the previous year, while the category as a whole grew less than 2 percent. Likewise, hand wash sales grew 68 percent over the same period, while the industry’s leading brand Softsoap only grew by 12.8 percent.

Method faces challenges when wrapping itself around its expansive growth. As Method continues to enlarge its homecare offering, concerns increasingly express that the brand must remain undiluted and that new designs are on target with consumers. Continuing to focus on and innovate around its already existing products is also a constant effort. Method CEO Alastair Dorrward told Inc. magazine, “There was a time when we could get away with a couple of leakers. That type of miss now is unacceptable.” Still, Method’s remarkable, consumer-driven products stand out from the rest of the pack, and the buzz that results naturally elicits sustainable passion and loyalty. The creativity and drive Method uses to bring disruption in everything it does continue to leave a bit of magic dust in every trail it blazes. At Method, branding isn’t dead—it’s alive and well.

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