

Creating

Brand-building, whether for people or companies, even towns, is what keeps the artistic juices flowing at Berni Design

Instant

Recognition

When Leonardo DiCaprio decided to copyright himself, National Public Radio called Greenwich's Stuart Berni for comment. Berni, a brand-building expert with a family business located on Steamboat Road, was enthusiastic. He thinks it's great that people, as well as paper towels and pasta, consider themselves brands. He views Berni Design, which he runs with his brother Stephen, a brand. And he thinks Greenwich residents should think of their town as "Brand Greenwich"

BY AMY KELLEY



The Berni brothers:
Stuart (left) and Stephen



Berni Design moved from Madison Avenue to Steamboat Road almost thirty years ago, but to Stuart Berni, who moved here at the same time, familiarity has not faded Greenwich's allure.

"New York City, as you know, never rests," said Stuart. "It's got a real heartbeat and people there are very driven ... more tense, overstimulated. You get to the office on the train, on a bus— I walked from the Upper East Side. Dad and I were concerned by the revolving door — what we called the 'Madison Avenue motion'. People were coming into your office for a year or two, motivated by money, then they went across the street [presumably to better paying jobs]. Our people here in Greenwich are motivated by the challenge [of each project] and because the people here are stimulating.

"There's nothing more fantastic," he added, "than that ride in every day — I live almost in the backcountry. It gets you percolating in the morning instead of having to deal with rude taxi cab drivers after you step off the train in Grand Central Station."





Buildings on Madison Avenue are “plain vanilla”, according to Stuart. “On the flip side of that, when we came to Greenwich, we had the opportunity to create excitement on the outside.”

Stuart was referring to an old PT boat factory on Greenwich’s waterfront that has undergone a major transformation into headquarters for Berni Design. On this little inlet of Long Island Sound, Manero’s is a landmark on the street, the sleek Berni building is beautiful, particularly if you see it at night, illuminated by indoor and outdoor lights. Inside, the executive offices are just as handsome: modern, decorated with sculpture and pale blue leather-and-steel chairs and a wall with a little round hole in it, a focal point of sorts, a decorative element that makes you pause, look and think, “What is it for?”

That sort of visual stop drives the company in its brand-building ventures. Founded in the thirties by the late Alan

Berni, it is run today by his sons: Stuart, CEO and president, and Stephen, the company chairman, who lives in nearby Stamford. Stephen’s daughter Lynn is the firm’s manager of financial services.

Lillian Berni, the family matriarch, met her husband Alan at Pratt Institute where she was studying interior design and he industrial art. She describes Stephen as her handsome son, the master of the group, and then says she’s saying that because he’s in the room. Mrs. Berni, who has a home in Florida and spends her summers in Stamford, is equally enthusiastic on the subjects of Stuart and her daughter Eve, a fine art painter who lives in California.

“Dad had a lot of New York energy,” said Stuart. “He was a fabulous designer, a New York entrepreneur. He was challenging to work with because he was something of a perfectionist, and because he started the business, he knew all aspects of it.

The transformed building (the design was a collaboration between the company and Michael Specter architects) is in a prime location on an historic street, once home to seafaring men. Two Berni power boats are anchored at the docks. Alan Berni, founder of the company, and his wife Lillian in Florida (opposite page, top), where she still maintains a home. Alan saw this building (opposite page, bottom) from Long Island Sound one day and then and there decided to move his operation to Greenwich.



A few of the recognizable logos-out of more than 500 - that Berni Design has created over the years.



He knew how to carry the ball effectively and rarely passed it off to someone else. Here, we permit people to be more self-motivated.”

“Mr. Berni would be very proud of what we’ve done here,” said Mrs. Berni of her husband Alan. “I love coming into the office, being amongst the career world — and I’m very proud of my family. I have full confidence in everything they do.”

Way, way before brand became the ubiquitous business term du jour, Berni Design was helping companies ensure they were projecting the right image to consumers. In fact, Berni Design has contributed to eleven of the top 100 brands of the twentieth century, as listed in the New York Times, including Kraft, Sears, Campbell’s, Coca-Cola, Colgate, Wal-Mart, Birds Eye and Marcal.

At first, the company did a lot of commercial and graphic design, still specialties today. Then an epiphany changed the business. And package design decisions moved “from the back room to the boardroom”, as Stuart likes to say.

Decades ago, Alan Berni designed three packages for a now-defunct cologne called That Man, for Charlie Revson of Revlon. As he showed all three designs to Revson, he pointed to one and said to Charlie, “This is our particular recommendation.” Charlie wanted to think about it overnight.

“It was clear to everyone that packaging decisions were being made based on what someone’s wife thought,” remembered Stuart. “Stephen thought we should be doing that research for the Charlie Revsons of the world, and be able to say, ‘The consumer is going to buy this one;’”

So Berni Design began asking people about their preferences and reactions to various products, using research that included focus groups, before anyone knew what focus groups were.

“We did this in the seventies, and we were really ground-breaking in that area,” Stephen said (Stephen describes himself as chairman or eldest brother, “depending on how the day is going”). “Picture yourself sitting in front of three bowls of ice cream. We’d show people three different packages and they’d taste three different bowls of vanilla ice cream. Then we’d ask them what they thought of each —

and the ice cream had actually been the same in all three bowls. They would say, 'That one's much creamier, and that one's much lighter, so I'll feed it to my husband because it's better for him; We were testing how packaging affected their perceptions. It was the same ice cream, but the results were incredibly different.'" That kind of testing is called "sensation transfer", Stephen explained.

Then the same people were asked to look at a shelf with the ice cream displayed on it. They'd be asked which they'd choose, assuming they were comparably priced. Some packages might lead consumers to consider them items for special occasions, while others might seem to be for kids.

The last and perhaps the sneakiest test was given in a rather offhand manner, as the test groups were thanked for their participation. "We asked, 'Which products would you like us to send to you?' It's another way of seeing what they really liked," Stephen explained. The test was designed to eliminate the "conspicuous consumption" factor, the chance consumers in a testing environment chose a certain product because it appeared to be the most expensive.

But testing of this dimension needs a more broad-based demographic than New York City could provide in the way of shoppers. "Our business is in the area of brand-building, and part of that is getting the opinions of consumers. You really can't get the pulse of the market from a New York City consumer," said Stuart Berni.

Stephen agreed. "Creative design and fine arts have been centered in New York, but we found that, as well as doing commercial design, we did a lot of research, and in Greenwich we had access to an audience of different demographics — Port Chester, Westchester, Stamford, Bridgeport."

"My Dad used to keep his yacht down here, prior to going south for the winter, so one lazy afternoon we were cruising down the harbor with the family, and taking a look at all the properties along the river," said Stuart. "We were just about ready to sign a lease at Greenwich Plaza, where we were going to take a whole floor. Then we saw the building, with a sign out front that said AMT Properties.

My brother's tenacious in terms of scouting out things. We called them. They were an experimental juice manufacturer, making fast-frozen juice, and they'd decided that day to sell the building. They said, 'Geez, it's amazing you called the day we decided to sell; So we bought it over the phone that afternoon. It was a big Quonset hut: three stories, open. It was used to arm PT boats during World War II'

The space that Stuart described as "fabulous" was almost designed as a huge cantilevered space, with trees in its center. But the architect suggested floors, and so the Bernis sailed right into the office rental business. They kept the first and fourth floors for themselves, and decided to lease the second and third. That turned out to be easy and lucrative.

"At that time Jok Lehmkuhl, then the chairman of the board of Timex, was interested in moving his operation out of the Seagram's Building, and he didn't want to commute anymore, explained Stuart. Lehmkuhl was in his seventies. But after seeing a cardboard model of what the space would look like, he crawled to the top of the third floor of the building, which was under construction. "He said, 'If you can deliver a building that looks like this model, I'll take it.'

And the space was rented at a rate the Bernis arrived at by considering what Timex had paid for the Seagram's building, which was premium space. Thus the two floors in an old PT factory became the most expensive office space rented in all of Fairfield County.

Today, Berni Design is captivated by brands. Stuart Berni even began giving out awards last year, the Berni Bests and the Berni Bombs, to identify products that clearly do or don't express their brands through their packaging, and those that are also memorable and user-friendly.

Winners included General Mills' Columbo Yogurt, which has a spoon in the lid, and Kellogg's Special K Plus, which advertises its calcium content through a milk-carton-shaped package. Losers included Smart Water, which lost because of what Stuart Berni calls the "discontent" between being smart and buying expensive water.

Berni Design occupies the top floor (for its spectacular view across the Sound) and the ground floor (for the creative team, which now numbers 23 employees).

Stephen's daughter Lynn is manager of financial services; since Arielle one of Stuart's children just completed her first year at Parsons School of Design, there just may be two members of the third generation in the very near future working at the company.

“There are companies now that have realized that the consistency between imaging and identity is very important,” he explained. For example, take Dr Pepper, a Berni client. While the Dr Pepper logo will remain the same worldwide, to establish recognition, marketing techniques are customized to local markets. “The hope would be that the manufacturer has a consistent brand image,” explained Stuart Berni.

Here in Greenwich, Berni Design did just that. Stuart, who has two teenage children, used his branding skills to make Arch Street, Greenwich’s teen center, a more attractive destination for local youth. The words “teen center”, decidedly not luring to teenagers, were removed from the center’s name. The logo was fashioned to look friendly.

But what are the limits of branding?

Should even the Town of Greenwich establish itself as a brand?

Stuart Berni thinks so.

He thinks Greenwich has a reputation as a Rodeo Drive East, and he’d like to change that. After all, Greenwich has an excellent symphony, several libraries, a beach park, hospital and terrific schools. Then there’s the proximity to Manhattan,

“Is the image of Greenwich tainted in a negative way? There are some areas that could be repositioned to enhance it,” he said. “So that it continues to be a desirable environment people want to come into, so the real estate values continue to increase, so the tax base increases to fund things like the hospital.”

In Australia, it’s the Sydney Opera House, In Paris, it’s the Eiffel Tower. But what’s a good image that says “Greenwich”?

“The only thing we’ve come up with that you can develop an icon around are the ferries—they have high visibility,” said Stuart, thoughtfully. Then, he added, there are Greenwich’s white fences, and the steeple of the Second Congregational Church. Perhaps these elements could be combined on a coat of arms, which would serve as the town seal. “A coat of arms has a sense of heritage and tradition that speaks to the history we offer.” That’s what Berni Design did for Arrow shirts — they gave them that coat of arms over the breast and made them seem established and tony.

“I think Greenwich has a certain brand now, said Stephen. “And I think you have to evaluate it, understand where it is now, and see where it should go in the future. What should it be known for? As a generally friendly town? Or one that’s more philanthropic? Should it draw people, or be a quiet community?”

On Steamboat Road, the Berni Design building is a visual icon, a summation of the company’s own brand. The multilevel third floor is wrapped in glass with magnificent water views. There’s a shaded dock used for meetings as well as entertaining. Tommy Hilfiger has offices there. To Stephen Berni, the renovated boat factory is a good example of what brand building is all about.

“You can improve on what you have,” he explained. “You don’t have to start from scratch to build a brand.”

Take Marcal. The paper towel company was about to improve the quality of its product and raise the price, when it decided the packaging should send a different message, one that didn’t say “we’re cheaper and less absorbent”. So a graphic that suggested a quilted towel absorbing a spill was added; the word towels, which stated the obvious, was removed, and the type style and colors were updated.

Back to Leonardo DiCaprio. Is establishing one’s self as a brand a bit strange? Is that taking brand-building too far?

“I think it’s great that people are taking that initiative,” Stuart said, citing Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart as two people who’ve succeeded at this. “When I mention their first names, you know who I’m talking about. It’s important for these people to be able to build a brand image, because it builds consumer confidence at the IPO.”

“If in fact his name brings panache, or style, to a product, that makes money,” explained Stephen. “When Michael Jordan wore sneakers, everybody wanted to wear them.”

“The important thing for any brand is building trust,” said Stuart. “And that’s something that I think is an admirable trait for any brand to be pursuing.”

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