



Advice From The Trail

Cara Nosek on Packaging Design and (Re)Branding

Ska Brewing – an iconic brand based on a comic book and inspired by all waves of Ska music – recently underwent a **brand refresh**. We called Cara Nosek, Queen of Graphics at Ska since 2013, to weigh in on how brands can evolve so gracefully too.



Ska's branding started with a comic book 28+ years ago. How did that inform your design decisions when refreshing such an iconic, established brand?

Co-Founders Dave Thibodeau and Bill Graham were big on comics from the start, and came up with their own comic story about small town guys who loved brewing good tasting beer and taking on the big conglomerate swill, Rotgutzen. We actually published a comic book a few years back with the story fleshed out! Check it out!

We knew we needed a refresh. Although we liked our existing branding with the clever names and characters, we realized consumers were having a hard time identifying us on the shelves. We started talking about it in 2018 and then started the big undertaking in 2019. Our team is small – about four or five of us at any given time. However, our Sales Team is much larger and we tapped into their insight from time to time since they are out in the world. We would sit down at least once a week and discuss our intentions and inspirations. We wanted to make sure we accomplished the *Billboard Effect*: when our beers are viewed on the shelves, the packaging will form a continuous horizon line across the board, capturing attention, unifying our shelf space and being instantly recognizable as Ska Brewing. We took inspiration from retro cocktail and comic artwork. And were inspired by the bold, bright, solid colors of other breweries, hard seltzers and cideries.

We knew we wanted some sort of big impact like the pop art of old. Something simpler and easily recognizable – for instance; the large colorful graphics like “POWs,” “WHAMs,” or “BAMs.”

We had a few core branding requirements: the black and white checkerboard, bright bold colors, staying true to our ethos, and certainly using the more recognizable characters in our Point of Sales and as secondary graphics.

I can't tell you how many drafts I went through. Once we decided on the broad look and feel, color swatches were picked for each SKU. Finding the perfect color combination can take a few rounds until you get it right. I'd say it took about six months before we had the first can finalized and sent to the printer.



What advice do you have for designers rebranding or refreshing time-honored brands?

I think having a good grasp of the history and the story really reflected how I went about rebranding the packaging. We already knew we needed to stay on track with the comic theme and the bright bold colors. We just needed to simplify the packaging across the board to bring it up to date. Having a solid team who could talk with really helped, and having a sales team that is out on the front lines giving their feedback of what they see working is also really beneficial.

Tap into the people around you for inspiration and feedback. Don't try and do it all on your own. Be confident in knowing your craft and knowing you are talented enough to convey that message.

How often should breweries rebrand?

I think it is always a good idea to stay on top of and aware of trends. Yet, rebranding so often can become quite expensive, schizophrenic, and confusing to the consumer. Especially for a smaller brewery that isn't well known in all markets. If certain trends, like cardboard packaging or 16oz. cans start taking over the shelf space and squeezing you out, then yes – a look at refreshing your presence there is definitely in order. There are a lot of factors involved. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.



How did you get to know the Ska style as a designer?

I've been listening to ska, reggae and punk since before I was in my teens, so I was already somewhat in-tune with the ska/punk culture of irreverence, cynicism, and social justice. I moved to Durango when I was 21 years old and was instantly thrown into the Ska Brewing scene thanks to my roommates and friends, as well as my place of employment. I worked at a local graphic design firm and helped Dave and Bill with quite a few projects before jumping ship and working with them in a freelance capacity. By the time they hired me in 2013, I was already well-versed in the Ska style and was quite familiar with their brand and culture. It certainly felt like the perfect fit.

What advice do you have for designers taking on established brands?

Work with brands that fit with your morals. You will have a hard time getting out of bed each day if you don't agree with their core values. Stand for something. Always get to know the brand you're working with as deeply as possible.

