

EPISODE 013

OMSOM

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Jon Yarian, Outline

AND

Ky Allport, Outline

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

ARMIN VIT

Hi, this is Armin Vit and welcome to episode 13 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Omsom, a new brand of starters to recreate authentic Asian dishes at home. Starters, which I had to look up when I first wrote about this are packets of goodness that include all the sauces, aromatics, and seasonings needed for a recipe.

The project, designed by North Charleston, South Carolina-based Outline was posted on Brand New on September 9. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast013 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast013, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Ky Allport, Creative Director at Outline and Jon Yarian, Managing Partner at Outline. No client on this episode, sorry.

In this conversation we get to hear, in contrast to some of the bigger firms we have talked with so far, how this smaller design firms works with clients, from attracting them with their work to securing the business to helping them launch consumer packaged goods under tight deadlines and mounting pressures and how good design can

happen within that context. You might also find it refreshing to hear about how the eventual design solution didn't come quickly or easily.

Now, let's listen in as Bryony follows up with Ky and Jon.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Let's go ahead and get started. I want to welcome you all to The Follow-Up and in order for our audience to get acquainted with you, if you can please state your name and your title before we get started.

JON YARIAN

Hi, I'm Jon Yarian. I'm Managing Partner at Outline.

KY ALLPORT

And I'm Ky Allport Creative Director at Outline.

BRYONY

Welcome. Thank you so much for that. Let's go ahead and start at the very beginning. And as we approach this project with Omsom, how did you come across the project and what was the process for you in terms of gaining the business?

JON

So they reached out to us and if I recall correctly, they saw something on Instagram. There was no like direct referral from somebody in common and, found our portfolio interesting. They were interested in the aesthetic and then we just started talking. It very quickly, the conversation turned away from food, into what they care about and what they believe in. And I think that conversation that started with that very first phone call, more or less continued throughout the project, we just sort of started talking and never stopped. But as you know, if you visit the site, if you go to omsom.com, neither of the co-founders Kim or Vanessa have formal culinary training. They're not chefs. Their whole plan was to connect with genius chefs. So there wasn't like a real big CPG food talk. It was more about perspective and point of view, and it sort of took off from there. And I don't recall, it didn't feel intensely competitive. I know they were looking at other teams, but it never felt like a bake-off—we just talked and then they made a decision and we started.

KY

Yeah, they came and visited pretty early on and we had a lot of deep conversations that really built the foundation for the project.

BRYONY So I want to ask a little bit more about the client side, but something really struck there. The fact that you mentioned, they found you through Instagram and that is an entirely new way of getting clients. Is this something that has happened to you before? How did that go about and how did, you know, how did you react upon saying, okay, we've been Instagrammed basically?

JON Uh, it's happened before. It's a perfectly fine way to start. It's very useful for a prospective client to have some relationship to the work we've produced and published. Having said that you do have to kind of work backwards from what they think they already know, or the assumptions they've made from it, not so much in this instance, but it speeds things up in a way. And in another way, I find it kind of slows them down because you have to kind of go back and educate and talk about, well, this is, this is our process. Like I know you saw that.

BRYONY You saw the end result, but there's a whole process to it.

JON Right.

KY And we're also very careful not to represent ourselves as having like a house style. And so we were pretty cautious when someone is immediately attracted to work that they've seen on something like Instagram and for fear that, you know, they want something exactly like what they've already seen. So, we were lucky in this case that Kim and Vanessa were—there wasn't anything that they were seeking, but, but rather our ideas, which was great.

BRYONY And do you see that you're getting more attraction out of Instagram, for example, than Behance or your own website?

KY Yeah, we've had quite a few people that have found us that way or, or through like Pinterest seems to be another commonality. Jon, do you have any insight into...?

JON I think it's still for us majority word of mouth. I don't consider us all that famous. Maybe we will be. [laughter] But it's word of mouth and we're,

we're pretty committed to the way we do things, which I'm sure we'll talk about, which I think is fun, but makes us a little bit different and maybe not quite as broadly appealing. So word of mouth and then to some extent, Instagram and published work.

BRYONY Yeah. I keep finding that social media is delivering at a different level, basically since COVID started. There's a reliance on this social media that is popping up more often that I find very interesting. So you said, well, Omsom and the founders is what they care about. Can you expand on that? What do they care about?

JON Happily. And I want to be clear that I'm not speaking for them and they've recorded any number of interviews that any listener could find in their own voices, but they had an intention to create a business that would allow them to move and operate in the culture and be seen in ways that they felt very strongly about outside of like purely compensatory or remunerative. It wasn't just like, hey, we think there's a soft spot in the marketplace for this. So we're going to exploit it. That's not what we heard. It was, this is something we care deeply about and is representative and is about us and people like us. So the chefs that produce the recipes in the sachets and then their communities of followers, I think for Kim and Vanessa, it was always about serving that audience and having that audience feel seen and feel understood.

And that was very, very appealing to us. Is there was something here about reclaiming or creating space in the discourse for what they wanted to eat and the way they wanted to eat it and to do it in a way that wasn't immediately compromised to broaden it for new audiences. I'm doing big air quotes. And if you're listening, you can't see it, but it's not uncommon for us to be approached for projects like this that are really about, you know, landing on a shelf at a Lowe's or a Kroger or Publix. And you really, they really want you to dumb it down to make it approachable. And that was never the mission here. It was like, no, let's just do the thing. Let's do it for people who get it and

others will come along, but not because we compromise the concept to make it easy for them.

BRYONY That's a wonderful foundation to start a project with. So you met after, you know, having that Instagram exchange and started the conversation. Can you expand on what that process was like up to signing contracts and starting to work? Like, what is the team with an Outline like who's, who's responsible for what and how you take on a project like this?

JON It's pretty simple, cause it's, there's not a million people here. It starts with me and with a conversation that has us get a little bit clearer on what you're up to, the way you want it to go, the results you want to produce. We typically have a couple of conversations. I think maybe more than some of our peers before we even produce a proposal, because we want to get to know the people we're thinking about working with a little bit, and that can expand to an introduction, particularly to Ky to make sure it's a fit. And everybody's really interested. And then because we focus so exclusively on branding and launching—we name companies—the timing is always influenced by the client side, which is people who are usually kind of freaking out. I mean, they're about to risk their reputations and all of their money and their parents' money. And so that enters into the mix to. Where we'll produce a proposal and we'll make an agreement and then it can get pretty frantic, pretty quickly. Um, and after that, you'll have some exposure to almost everybody here through our particular process.

BRYONY And what is the design team look like from your perspective Ky?

KY At the moment it's myself and my husband Will, he's our Lead Designer. So we work on the majority of the branding projects together.

BRYONY All right. I have to ask this just because Armin and I ourselves are married and everybody asks us this question. It's not often that I get to turn it around. What's it like to work with your husband in a creative environment like this?

KY You know, I find that we're extremely lucky because we get to create together on a daily basis. And you know, we've been doing this together for so long that there's this kind of intuition between us and this understanding. Jon always laughs that I can critique his work, you know, just with like a glance or an expression. There's a lot that kind of goes unsaid, but that is just...

BRYONY Perfectly understood.

KY Yeah. Um, so it's fun and, and you know, it's not without its challenges obviously, but yeah. We feel really luckily to be able to produce work and see these things come to life together. It's a cool process.

BRYONY Well, I'm glad to hear that. So given the design solution where the brand ended up, I'm curious to know what was the initial design direction that they gave you, what bits of guidance did Omsom provide that led to this design?

KY Well it was interesting, because we're able to really connect with Kim and Vanessa on a level that typically takes, you know, a bit more coaching or guidance from our side. And that's, you know, we're a very concept driven studio. We're really interested in non-literal representation. We really want to get at brands that are more evocative or feelings of feelings and emotions, um, create kind of sensory experiences. And we really knew early on that there's no room for anything in this concept that was going to be interpreted as literal or like stereotypical Asian-ness. We knew it had to have a sense of where it came from, but be one step removed. So I think that's something that we connected on early on.

BRYONY So you have this kind of guidance, but I mean, the logo itself is so juicy. How did you end up with that logo? What was your inspiration or what was the guiding kind of light?

KY I think the logo, I mean specifically was really just born from the overall concept of the brand, which is about activation. And we found that heat was really kind of the boldest expression of that, and the brand,

how, as it relates specifically to their product, these aren't just sauces that act as a condiment for a dish it's really through this process and activation of heat and stirring and mixing that kind of brings the flavors to life and creates the dish. And so that was really kind of one of the central themes that we latched on to that inspired the logo and its ability to distort and expand and grow much like flames, how they would kind of consume or fill the space that they occupy. And then I think the other kind of key piece of that is the idea of this noisy rambunctious brand, that's really inspired by the name Omsom which means noisy or kind of chaotic. It was a term used to scold children for being kind of unruly and loud. So those two kind of key facets really informed much of the design direction from the logo to the packaging, to the colors, these kind of playful stickers that adorn the packaging.

BRYONY Yeah. I mean the logo itself and how you transform it through heat is one of the things that really stood out in the comments on Brand New on the, on the blog and how people were reacting to that, ad that was really interesting. It is rare to get that much positive feedback on a brand—so congratulations on that. As you started mentioning the packaging and kind of like the stickers, that goal, along with it, growing up in Mexico city, I can recognize a little bit of those references. There's a lot of cultural overlap between Asian culture and Mexico. And, uh, I would like to hear more about how you ended up going in that direction, although you've hinted a little bit at it at this point and how you modernized that and made it into this more sophisticated brand.

KY That's a great question. And it's tough because I don't feel that there's really any like too specific Asian reference in here. I think it has like a youthfulness and a vibrancy. We are more thinking about, you know, what feeling would it evoke to be in like a noisy kind of lively Asian street market or that you're serving a big family meal and there's kids running around and there's all these smells and noises and a lot of chaos kind of happening. Um, so that was more like kind of what we were trying to evoke... in terms of like specific Asian references. I think

they're, they're much more subtle for instance, in the typographic details of one of the fonts we is called Gosha Sans. And it has these kind of angular letter forms that I think could be reminiscent of non-Western calligraphic details of maybe like an Asian script or something. I also think the stickers kind of have this like pop art reference. It suggests animation or movement. So references like that I would say are much more kind of subtle than anything that would point to like a country of origin.

BRYONY It, it is definitely something kind of, and the undershirts of the brand, but you can sense that because I've been in those markets, I've been in those spaces, it kind of, I guess it evoked that feeling without being in my face about it. But I find that fascinating. And I think that in a way you managed to turn that into a minimalist package while being chaotic and noisy at the same time. And that's a bipolarity that I found quite appealing. You also touched upon the color palette. How did you end up choosing those final colors?

KY We knew we wanted it to be very bright and bold. And really, you know, these colors are like borderline neon. They're very punchy, but we wanted... everything that we chose was kind of initially inspired by an ingredient. So like the yellow color, we call it Ginger, the red or the deep orange we're calling it like Mandarin there's, uh, Banana Flowers. So we were initially looking at these ingredients that may appear and some of these cuisine types and then injecting a bit more saturation and boldness into them. And so it ends up with this very kind of lively, vibrant kind of like the heat has been turned up on these colors that may have been more natural in their original form.

JON The only thing I'd add the stickers and color to, the stickers also just solve a pure wayfinding issue. You've got a multi-multi variety. It's going to grow a lot that has to be navigable and has to be intuitive and flexible. And we needed a pallet that had enough depth to it to really sustain a site and a product line that are only going to grow. So trying to solve future problems with the right amount of sophistication and

depth so that Kim and Vanessa, whether we're doing it or they are, or whoever there's enough there to work with to build out and grow and not have to like redo and fully reconsider. I think that that was kind of at the heart of some of those decisions too.

BRYONY Yeah. You beat me to my next question, Jon.

JON Great.

BRYONY You mentioned a lot earlier that, you know, there's already some skews being worked on, is this something that you are still involved with?

JON Uhum.

BRYONY Can you speak a little bit as to how that ongoing relationship and how it strengthens as you go through the different skews, um, and the different parts and how you foresee, you know, this turning into something bigger that then maybe you can hand in and kind of like an in-house department or something like that, if they were to grow that much.

KY It's been interesting because just recently we've been working with them on kind of their next line. There'll be another line of cuisines soon, and that we really got the opportunity to kind of revisit the branding, which we're very excited about and actually kind of pushed that initial concept a bit beyond heat. So this next iteration really pushes the initial concept into something that really plays up this idea of activation and even pushes it a bit further, like what other expressions could we take this into? And so it kind of gets into the realm of like sound or vibration or electricity, which I think has been interesting to revisit it and kind of even be able to take it a bit further.

JON Just purely functionally, Outline is not built to be anybody's like agency of record, or work with them through the year. It's just not what we do. We're pretty exclusively focused on starting or changing things. And so for us, a project like Omsom is almost bittersweet in that a really successful client as they have been grow and grow fast and can

actually speed to that point of separation. Where their needs are just larger than we can address and just outside of our core skill set. So they're getting to a point where they, we might come back to do sort of like big things, like if they had an entirely new product or something like that, we'd love to do that, but there is a natural end point for us that can make a sad or sometimes come as a great relief. But in this instance, it'll be, we'll be sorry when they get too big for us.

BRYONY I think it's fascinating that you speak to letting a client go in a way, but realizing kind of when, when your kid is going off to college, you know, it, there was a point where you have to let them go and they'll come back when they need their laundry cleaned up or they need, you know, something else. And, uh, I think it's incredible that you recognize that within yourselves and live to that standard and that opens up your schedule and your talent to focus on other emerging clients and keep things fresh at all times. I think there's something beautiful to that as well. How did you end up in that place?

JON There's a, there could be like a two hour therapy session answer to that. I'll give you something a little bit shorter suitable for this podcast, which is Outline's leadership. We're all into our careers. You know, I'm drifting towards 40, we've had a chance to get to know how we work and what, what we do best. And we've gotten a lot of feedback from peers and colleagues. And I think over time, you gain an appreciation for what inspires you and what you're good at and where you can make the biggest impact. And for us, something that we see the same and agree on is we want to focus on that. Even with the risks that come with it. I don't want to pretend that we do a bunch of stuff that we're not interested in and not good at. I would rather put a big bet on what we are good at and just trust that more things will come for us to do then get really graspy and greedy and cling to things and be defensive. I think that mindset is both a failure as a business model, I also find it to be anti-creative in its nature. But that risk taking is what

fuels the kind of work we're talking about today. And so if you can sit in it, and be committed to it, it really serves the work. If not always your blood pressure.

BRYONY Um, I, I'm a risk taker myself. I can embrace that. I enjoy it. And I love change. We've moved to cities. We've lived in Atlanta, in Chicago and New York and Austin and Bloomington now, just because I love to kind of reinvent things and get out of the routine and things like that. Ky question, so as you let go of clients, when they're all grown up and ready to spread their wings, what is your process like in handing things off?

KY In this case, especially we've created a really robust brand guideline book, you know, that details everything you would expect from logo usage, to typography, color codes. And in this case actually had a corresponding brand voice and tone guide. So Jon and Margaret are brand strategists here, worked with them to establish much of the brand strategy work. So it was really a kind of visual and verbal guidebook that they use going forward. Uh, sometimes we'll do a pretty intense training with the founders or if there's an in-house designer to really make sure that they grasp the significance of everything that we've, that has gone into creating the brand identity and, and making sure that they have at least a comprehension of usage moving forward. Because as you know, like one of the most important aspects of, of this, as, you know, as it leaves our hands and goes to someone else like that consistency of use is really important. And so we, we do whatever we can to kind of make sure that that is really conveyed.

BRYONY I am sure they're appreciative of every little detail handed over. I do have one question kind of looking back at the process is, in this particular case, did you present just the one idea, did you present multiple ideas that they see the one and be like, that's it, you nailed it. Or how was that process in coming up with a creative and selling it?

JON We presented a bunch of stuff. And, and they were very involved and gave us a ton of feedback and it was joyful, and contentious, and messy. And we could pretend like we just showed them one thing and they loved it and it would be like utterly false and they did something really special in that they worked with us to find this, and it was a search. And when we found it, we all knew, and we didn't have to sell it because we knew we were there. We had, everybody had a shared appreciation of having arrived and it doesn't mean we all enjoyed every second of the journey to get there, but it's just what it took. So there is a mountain of stuff laying around here digitally that didn't make it. Uh, and it just, we had to get all of that out of our systems. Like we had to see all to get to the next thing to get to where we ended up.

BRYONY Personally. I think the best work comes from those collaborations of not finding it right away and just working through things. So I don't want to take all your day here kind of to start to wrap it up. You know, Omsom found you through Instagram now you've posted this on Instagram. Do you see this turning into kind of like your next portfolio piece that will give you new clients? Or is it turning into something? Or do you hope it will into something specific?

JON People have—I mean, obviously here we are, people have noticed it and we're proud of it. And I couldn't be more pleased for Ky and for Will who like any designer are very interested in the feedback of their peers. They're sort of somewhat interested in other opinions, but when it really comes down to it, it's peer recognition. The interesting thing is it's so individualistic, it's so custom and personal and it's, so the work for Omsom specifically is so wrapped up in their psychology. That it's been interesting to have a couple of conversations from people who kind of want that. Like they want us to do it again, something like it and having to tell them—

BRYONY They can't have it.

JON —that is utterly wrong. It's the wrong question. It doesn't work, but, um, I'm happy to have those conversations if it means we get to do stuff like this.

KY You know this project in particular, really challenged us to explore kind of a new aesthetic that we hadn't really had an opportunity to delve into before now. Um, and it just, it challenged us in so many ways that now that we're kind of, um, to the point that we're actually talking about it with you, you know, we have extreme pride for being able to bring this to life with them. And I would just echo what Jon said. This was like absolutely a co-creation that relied on a lot of trust and a ton of communication and a lot of trial and error to get here and kind of like get out of our own heads and kind of reassess our own understanding of what it means to be like first or second generation immigrant. And like what that experience was like for them and, and really come to a new understanding of how we can make that connection for them in the world and through this identity. So, uh, it was a massive learning experience and really, really tough at times. But yeah, I would love to do more of this type of work that really pushes our skillset and gets us to think differently.

BRYONY Literally putting you out of your comfort zone, as trite as that might sound, it is very rewarding to be in that area. Well, thank you so much both of you. I really appreciate your time today and sharing your stories and your process with us. And I hope you'll follow us up in the Follow-up.

JON Thank you. It's a pleasure.

KY Thank you so much.

ARMIN Helping clients launch a product into the market is not easy but Outline seems to have, well, a pretty good outline of how to make it happen and they understand their role in their client's journey, helping them make the most impact, quickly. As soon as I stop recording one thing is for sure, I am ordering me some Omsom packets of goodness.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.