

EPIISODE 014

TECATE

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Meg Beckum, Elmwood

AND

Mark van Iterson, Heineken

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.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode 14 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Tecate, one of the most popular beers in Mexico and probably one of the most recognizable consumer brands in Mexico, period.

The project, designed by the New York, NY, office of Elmwood was posted on Brand New on September 22. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast014 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast014, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Meg Beckum, Executive Creative Director at Elmwood and Mark van Iterson, Global Director of Design at Heineken.

In this conversation we talk about the importance of honoring a beer brand's heritage and finding the visual cues that make it unique. We also get some insight into the complexities of designing packaging for such a mainstream brand and the many rounds necessary it takes to get it right. Above all, though, we talk at length about Mexico and beer, two things near and dear to our hearts.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Meg and Mark.

ARMIN VIT Welcome everyone to The Follow-Up. Today I am pretty excited to be talking about Tecate, which is the beer brand that I pretty much grew up with in Mexico. It was in all the, it was the official beer of most venues, of most concerts. It's everywhere. Everywhere you go all around Mexico. It's part of the visual landscape. Today we have Mark joining us from Amsterdam and Meg from New York. Welcome to the show.

MARK VAN ITERSON Thanks Armin.

MEG BECKUM Thank you. Thanks for having us.

ARMIN So, Mark, uh, let's start with you. Heineken manages some of the most popular beer brands in Mexico, and that includes Carta Blanca, Sol, Indio, Bohemia, Dos Equis, and Tecate. Dos Equis is probably the most well-known of those in the U.S. thanks to the Most Interesting Man in the World Campaign, which was great. And Sol has also broken into the U.S. Market. What prompted the decision to expand Tecate into the U.S. and other markets?

MARK I think it grew actually quite organically into the U.S. you know, you should know, I'm the Global Head of Design for Heineken. I sit in Amsterdam, I support our brand portfolio, the design of it across the globe. I'm not an expert in Mexican beers in particular so it's... of course we've been diving into the history of Tecate and then always, especially also interested in the visual history of the brand. Where does the iconography come from? Trying to understand consumer rituals and behavior about beer? So what I know about Tecate in the U.S. is that I think there are simply such a large Mexican/Hispanic community in the U.S. that they bring their beers and they love their beers. And Tecate is indeed a big one and is a very loved one. And it's a very iconic, well-established brand in Mexico. So yeah, that's what people took and started buying. And then often with these things, it

grows organically. And then of course we see all of a sudden in the U.S. like, okay guys, this is getting significant. So let's also really support it.

ARMIN Yeah, I think it's true that, uh, we, we like to bring in some of the things that we missed from Mexico, whether it's beer, whether it's spicy candy that you just can't get here. So it's nice that you just follow on that, not trend, but that how Mexicans tried to bring in a little bit of the country into here and every other ethnicity pretty much.

MARK No... And exactly, you know? Sometimes I tell people, or, I mean, my wife designing beer logos and packaging and visual identities, you say, okay, how exciting is that? You know, you are filling almost your life with it, but it's amazing. If you dive into beer, you learn about culture, you learn about people's motivations. You learn about some of the most beautiful moments in life. So it's, yeah, it's very emotional, but having a beer together with friends, family, celebrating, going out, it is such an amazing part of culture that indeed what you see happening is people cross borders, they bring their beer because it's part of their life. It's part of who they are. And that certainly happened with the Mexican beers and Tecate in the U.S.

ARMIN Wonderful. Yeah, beer, family, two great things—bring them together even better. Um, so Meg... Elmwood has been working with Heineken for many years now, which has included work for some of these Mexican beer brands. So you have definitely proven you can do the work. Was it an assumption that you would be getting this Tecate project, or did you still have to pitch for it and earn it the good old fashioned way?

MEG [Laughter] Uh, no, it's, it's never an assumption that you're going to get the work. And we absolutely, we had a very competitive pitch that set our teams, both in New York and in London put us all to work. And we actually pitched for three different brands and we were the lucky ones to win Tecate. You know, we had worked on Tecate before... everyone at Elmwood has huge love for the brand. So we were delighted to win, but a lot of work on our part went into winning it.

MARK It's a good question Armin. I always believe in long-term, in longevity and also here in long-term relationships and agencies, knowing the brand inside out, knowing where the creative freedom is, and then let's stay true to that. It might sometimes look like the grass is greener on the other side, but often, mostly that's not true at all, but indeed are, they are also big by the way, because the U.S. became such an important dimension in the brand, so there was quite some stakeholders and that we really wanted to find the best to do this. And in a sense, I was also very happy that it was Elmwood who proved that they could continue their work and were the best to do it.

ARMIN Meg, because in my mind, I've always thought about Elmwood as being a London-based firm. Has Elmwood always done this work for Heineken from the New York office or the London office, or has it been split depending on the project?

MEG Has traditionally, you know, worked on a lot of Heineken brands. And it really depends on the geography of the brand. The London studio has been working on Amstel. We have a studio in Singapore that works on Tiger. We work on the brands over here in North America and the Caribbean, but, you know, so we sort of, depending on the geography we take on different brands. London is obviously our biggest studio. Um, our history is in the UK, but we are building the New York team because we are getting more and more opportunities over in North America. So I was really brought on board to help build a New York team and the New York studio.

ARMIN Got it. And Mark, so you mentioned that you're not that familiar with beer in Mexico, but once you started delving into the Tecate brand, what made it stand out or what was unique about it that made it different from the many other beer brands that you're aware of?

MARK Yeah, probably it's visual identity. Before I really knew the brand, the first time I saw it, I was actually surprised. And that was not per se, a positive as a designer. In first instance, especially the former two, three generations of design of Tecate brand. It's sort of ugly. If I

mention it, it is so weird with this sporty big italic letter, um, the huge black Eagle above it, there was something loud and in my European eyes, unsophisticated, maybe a bit American, and then I not trying to be disrespectful, but there is, you know, something, it lacks some refinement, or enrichment, or sophistication that you often have in beer. Even heritage, it look—but funny enough, if you look down into history, you also, you see where it come from, that it is not from the eighties, nineties, that it is way older and that already back then, that very specific typography, wordmark, and the Eagle and the T started to get its shape. Yeah. So, but ed was, for me, really the first thing that came to mind and also made me immediately sort of anxious and eager to touch it. Here, we can improve. So...

ARMIN You know, even as someone that grew up with it, I still look at it, especially as a designer. Like why, why has that stayed this way for so long? And, you know, we'll get to that question to you Meg, a little bit about the typography. Uh, but yeah, it's interesting that what stood out was the design, which is what makes it unique.

MARK Exactly, but in that sense, it is also a definite positive because it's very ownable, it's very recognizable, it's different. And that's of course always the balance for me, that's the core job to be done in these sort of renovation/evolutions. Is keep that distinctive sometimes maybe weird or, or maybe a bit ugly, you know, that keep the personality of the brand and move it forward, progress it, maybe make it a bit more current, contemporary, uh, make sure it works better on shelf or in the, the whole assortment lineup or whatever exactly the issues are. But staying true to who you are and evolving it to a next step. It's that balancing act. And especially in beer, I think by the way, because beer is one of the categories, maybe one of the rare categories where heritage and provenance and the history and all that emotion that comes with it is still so visible. And it's still so important. Also has values in these brands that, yeah, you really have to nurture that.

ARMIN Yeah. That's a really interesting thought about how, you know, you always try to evolve, but it's with such a competitive market with so many beers. And a lot of them came out at the same time, the same, uh, sort of necessities, but I think they are unique in their geography, their culture. It's important to maintain that. So Meg, a similar question to you since you have worked on many beer brands, what stood out to you and your team about the Tecate history and its place in the market?

MEG We wanted to tread lightly on the brand. What was really interesting to me is we have sort of in the States, this perception of Tecate is sort of this Mexican beer. We don't think of it as being this huge, massive beer that it is in Mexico. So one of the things our team did that was really important. And luckily it was before COVID we could go down and spend a lot of time in Mexico. And I thought, what was most inspiring to me, especially in Northern Mexico, which is really the Tecate stronghold, it's the symbols of Tecate are painted. We visited Monterrey and the Eagle is everywhere, and you see in the streets, the crazy weird wordmark, but it's really a celebration of that region of Mexico. I was really inspired by the symbology the iconicity of the Eagle and of the wordmark. So it was one of those brands I felt so lucky to work on. I think it's such a cool brand with such an interesting attitude. I love the quirkiness of it. I think the sad thing about branding these days is people just strip out all the personality and all the spirit of brands. So we were very careful not to do that. Uh, and I think the reason that our relationship with Heineken really works is we have a very similar design philosophy and that's all about really identifying those iconic assets, crafting them so they're beautifully crafted. So we looked at every detail, we redrew that wordmark, that's so bizarre over and over again, looking, you know, at every connection point, looking at how it would live with the Eagle, thinking about how it's going to translate against all the different touch points. So of course, packaging is hugely important in beer, but we also have a huge brand world to support. So thinking about how that's going to translate, can we scale it, all those sort of details. But again, we wanted to tread lightly, it's a

brand with so much spirit and so much personality. Uh, it was really more of an effort to sort of strip back everything else in the system and really double down on those beautiful iconic assets.

ARMIN This may be a strange question to answer, but when you're down in Mexico and trying to look at, you know, absorb how Tecate manifests in different places, was it different? Or did you find any difference between how Tecate comes across in Mexico as how another beer comes across in other countries?

MEG Yeah, it's funny. Um, and we've had a lot of conversations with the team, especially talking to the U.S. Tecate team and the Tecate team in Mexico. And the U.S. there's a big story of being Mexican. And it's a celebration of being Mexican, where in Mexico, it's just so ingrained in the culture that it doesn't, you know, it's, it's the biggest, massive beer in Mexico. So there's less of that Mexican story to it. Whereas in the States, uh, people kind of see it almost as a Mexican craft beer, which is sort of funny because it's, it's a massive beer in Mexico. So I think like playing up the Mexicana of the brand was not important, because it is Mexico, we're in Mexico and this is a symbol. So that story, um, was sort of less important to the Tecate Mexican team, uh, as it was to the Tecate United States team, because they saw it as this symbol of being a Mexican American and this pride, whereas the Mexican culture really, it's just part of their life. It's very ingrained and it's a given in their culture.

ARMIN Yeah, that's really an interesting insight because I like being very aware of the brand. Like it's part of Mexico. Like there was no other, it's almost like Budweiser or Coors here in the U.S. where it's just like, it's everywhere that you're always surrounded by it, no matter where you are, that you sort of take it for granted. And it's interesting that here it was perceived differently. Mark, in regards to the assets of the brand, you know, the Eagle, the wordmark, did you do any market consumer research around it that said, please do not touch this, or was it, or did you just know sort of intuitively that you should not touch any of this stuff?

MARK Yeah, both over the years, of course there was research, uh, when Elmwood did the former step that was researched, um, our marketeers, the guys in Mexico and also in the U.S. they, of course, they talk to consumers, whether it's a big research or more anecdotally an ongoing basis, but on the other hand here, I think we hardly needed it. If you see this brands, uh, indeed as, as Meg describes around you in the streets. But also if you see simply the former design and its design history where it comes from, it's immediately clear that the Eagle, the wordmark, and the color scheme are three very iconic things and are very outstanding and have so much personality. Yeah. That you would be crazy if you're gonna take that off. And then it's more down to the detailing. So how far can I push it? Was the diagonal, the angle of the wordmark Tecate crucial or not? You know, it's more that sort of things. And there, I believe research cannot give you the answers upfront, really, because it depends on how you combine it with the Eagle. It depends how you put it in a layout on a can. So, there it's really exploring the opportunities in a quite systematic way actually. And it's something that Elmwood is very good at as treating the sort of icons really with respect, identifying what makes it so unique and then systematically explore the variation. So where is the freedom? What should we keep unchanged and then build this visual story together. And, of course, during the process doing some consumer research as well to check whether you're on the right path.

ARMIN You sort of touched on a subject that I was going to ask about later, which has in particular to the angle of the wordmark, that, you know, for years, it's just being at an angle and you just assume that that's how most people recognize it. I mean, was it a hard decision to move away from that angle and say like, Oh, let's just be normal and set it straight? Or was it something that you saw some necessity to bring in a little bit of that sophistication into the brand?

MARK You know, is it hard? It's always, you always think very hard and we've seen many options and Elmwood has explored a lot. I think that

simply that the layout where we landed felt so strong, and so logic, and that angled feeling in fact is in the wordmark itself, it's in the detailing, it's all these angled lines and letters. That's what made it characteristic. And not the fact that the whole wordmark was under an angle. And of course, by the way, we have the luxury in Mexico, there's quite a lot of people in our breweries who've been working for this brand and who are part of this brand for a lifetime almost. If these guys... and these guys can be very conventional, uh, you touch their brand, but if they feel it's right, yeah, it's right. I mean, they live it. They are the brand. And I think in this case, Meg, you maybe know better. I don't think there was a lot of discussion about it.

MEG No, I don't think it was because again, I think, you know, we preserved the essence of the most distinctive assets. Uh, we kept the angle and the sort of interesting letter forms of the wordmark. And I think, I mean, so much of the work we do at Elmwood, it's really trying to solve for issues that brands are having. And the angle actually, when you went into the brand world or even, you know, packaging is, you know, we do sort of big brand explorers at Elmwood, but a lot of times the packaging is the true test. The formal design process gets very challenging on packaging. And I think when we let go of the angle, it was something we tried, you know, we did many, many iterations on the packaging, but when we let go of that angle, we were able to do so much more. I think it was a bit of a restriction. So once we let go of that, we were able to scale everything up, and you can get really big with the wordmark on the can. And so, I think sort of letting go of some of those treatments, even some of the detailing, the drop shadows on the wordmark, you know, you're really able to celebrate and really get expressive with those iconic assets, because that's what we try to do. We kind of had to strip it back to the most distinctive assets, but then we try to keep them fresh and new and think of different ways we can use them. So if anything, I think it allowed us to have more freedom and more expression with the assets.

- ARMIN** And taking a step back. And something that Mark mentioned at the beginning is the original wordmark or the most recent wordmark, they're just like, eh, they're not quite pleasant. Was there any point at the beginning of the project where you, where you were thinking, like, what did we get ourselves into? There's no salvaging this into anything. Or from the beginning, was it just a welcome challenge to have to work with this or figure out how to make it work?
- MEG** It was never even on my mind to make huge changes on this brand. I had a lot of love for the quirkiness of the brand. To me, it's what makes it distinctive. So I'm not a designer that wants to blow up brands. And I don't think Elmwood takes that approach. So if anything, for me, it was like, I want to get my hands on it because I think it can be even better. I think we can craft it even more so we can celebrate the personality and that distinctiveness of the brand. So to me, you know, we didn't even explore that. Um, it was never something that I even felt was necessary. It's not a broken brand.
- ARMIN** And then you mentioned about the, how the project turns a little bit more complex once you get into packaging. Can you tell us a little bit more about the process of how you start to design, you know, cans, bottles, things like that, how many options do you go through? You know, you say like five, is it 50 and you don't have to reveal all the secrets, but just to give us a sense of what that looks like.
- MEG** I mean, it's tons of iterations when it gets to packaging. For beer, a lot of times we start with packaging and really think about how the assets are going to live, what we need to do to craft them. And I can't tell you how many iterations we did on this packaging. [Laughter]
- MARK** Not because it's secret, but just because it's so many.
- MEG** So many, there's so many and you know, and we test that with consumers as well to see how far can we push this? Uh, what are the consumers comfortable with in terms of how much we change the packaging, then that informs us. We go back and do more and more rounds to take the insights that we learned into testing and to learn

from that and make the designs even stronger. So it's a, it's a very long process. We worked on this rebrand for just about two years. And then from there, we really, once we've crafted those iconic assets, that to me, the hard part is sort of over. And the fun part is really thinking about the brand world and all the different ways that we can express the assets and the iconicity of the brand in sort of new ways, but still staying really true to the brand and really iconic with the brand. So then we start thinking about, okay, what does this look like in a stadium? What does this look like onsite in a bar? What does signage look like? That's the beautiful thing of beer. There's so much ephemera that lives around the beer world, and there's so much to design. So to me, you know, once you crack that packaging, then the fun really starts.

ARMIN I'm going to get back to cracking open the fun. But, um, Mark, I have a question for you. How does that process then look on your end at Heineken? How many people have to look through it? Who's involved in the decision-making process and again, not revealing names specifically.

MARK No, no, no, no, no, but I can be clear. On Tecate, you mean... because the governance differs a little bit for brands. For Heineken brands, it's a bit more complex because it's global and it comes from head office and no, but it's, Tecate it's local. Our Mexican colleagues, they own it. So it's their responsibility. We in Amsterdam cannot know better. Uh, we cannot come even close to knowing the brand better than what the guys in Monterrey, in Mexico do. They live it, it's their consumers, that's their responsibility. Of course, it's a huge brand. So a fundamental redesign like this new logo, new primary packaging, the general manager of Heineken Mexico, our regional president, responsible for the Americas will definitely have a look. And if he or she doesn't like it, now there will be a discussion. No, but for the rest it is local. I was also, I'm just advising, I'm consulting on the sideline. You know? I'm experienced in design, brand design, I'm experienced in beer brand design, I'm myself, hands-on and responsible for the Heineken brand

design in all aspects. So, I have an expertise in which I can be of value for our marketers in whatever country in the world for all our brands. But I always leave the responsibility at the marketing guys. They know how to do it. They have less experience in design. So together that goes very, very well. And certainly as Meg explains brand world, yeah. Then you get into sponsorships, point of sale materials, events, bars. Again, I can, from a design point of view, give help, give a bit of guidance. And like, is it smart to use the visual icons like this? Or is it better to do it like that? How much freedom would you give? And also for that, by the way, there's not a standard formula. For one brand you go much more creative or wild because it fits the brand. And for other brands, you stay a bit more consistent and a bit more conservative because it fits that brand. So Heineken brands has a very strong color for example, green is our signature. If you now see that the Tecate lineup, there is not even that strong color signature anymore or original, it was originally red, but Tecate Light in the meantime, I think is bigger than original. So that's blue. There is no red more anymore on Tecate Lights. So here clearly the Eagle, the wordmark, are the icons that you're going to keep consistent and because they are so unique and distinctive, I think you can play with them and be very creative with them and still keep the recognition.

ARMIN Right. This sort of segways back into what you were talking about Meg, about building that brand world. How does that look in terms of implementation? Is that something that you're doing at Elmwood or is it something that you hand off to the Tecate team in Mexico and say like, here you go, have fun. Which would be fun!

MEG It's a little bit of both. I think of Elmwood, that's really building the foundation for the brand world, so really exploring it, thinking about designing and formulating some design principles. We try not to hand over guidelines and say, good luck. You know, we want to inspire people with our vision, for what we see the brand world being. But we work very, very closely for a brand as big as Tecate. There are many, many stakeholders. Their internal teams, merchandising, there's all

the partner agencies that touch this brand, both on a national Mexican level, but also in a regional level. So the way we approach it is of course we do a, a big explore. We sort of set the creative foundation and the principles for using the different assets. And then we spend a lot of time with the different teams. I went down to Mexico, met the agency partners, met the internal teams, we worked through issues together. You know, they were designing signage and all kinds of different things. And so I partnered with them to figure out, okay, this isn't working, this is working. And we just do a lot of, a lot of training and a lot of communicating on figuring out all the challenges of implementing a brand this large.

ARMIN Nice. So I have a couple of closing questions for each of you we'll start with you, Meg, what was the most rewarding aspect of working on this brand?

MEG I think this builds off of Mark's point in that, you know, I have such love for this brand. I have such love for our teammates down in Mexico. You know, I learned so much about Mexican culture just through designing a beer. And, uh, it was a very meaningful experience. You know, I went to parts of Mexico that I'd never visited before and now to see something that we put so much time and effort on and all the details of crafting, seeing that come to life throughout the country. It's, it's amazing. It's very, very rewarding. It's a lot of effort and time that goes into this sort of work, but there are so many more learnings beyond design. And I think that's what I really love about my job.

ARMIN Well answered. Mark for you in terms of marketing and building the Tecate brand, what is the most exciting aspect of this new design?

MARK As a designer? These cans, I want to hold in my hands. I just find them very beautiful, very strong. Have such an appealing personality that aesthetically, you know, I want to hold it and I want to drink from it. That's always, I mean, that's always sort of... and it's one personal opinion, but I mean, I've seen some can designs, some beer designs, and this is one that I really am proud of in that sense. Of course the

business part of it is I remember, I think five, six years ago back then the former restyling also by Elmwood won the Grand Prix in the design effectiveness awards. And I think five years later, we did an even better job. It's still a bit too early to tell, but this brand is very healthy. It's going very well. Well, 2020 was a bit of a strange year, of course. So the numbers of 2020 don't really count. But yeah, so I think it's also, it's helping our business and that's in the end also, of course what we're doing it for. And then finally we, um, I haven't seen yet, but I'm quite sure if we not dive into it, that consumers will also know that it's being very proud of my Tecate. Look how cool it looks.

ARMIN Yeah. I think this has been a bright spot in 2020. There's lot of things going on in the world, but for us designers for you Mark, and the beer industry for you Meg who does packaging, I think things like this give us hope for a better year ahead. And the design is fantastic. As someone that has seen this brand so often, and it's so ingrained as part of my culture to see it evolve in such a sophisticated way that maintains the equity that it has had for so many years. And now as a designer to see, not grow up, but glow up as a kid say on Instagram these days. Uh, it's pretty fantastic. So thank you both for being on the show and thank you both for doing a fantastic job on this and helping bring the Tecate brand into the U.S. and other markets. So, uh, thank you, Mark. Thank you Meg for being on The Follow-up.

MARK Thank you so much. Pleasure.

MEG Thanks, Armin.

BRYONY The hero of this story is the Tecate wordmark, which, with all of its awkward eccentricities, manages to live not just another day but surely, at least, another decade. Championed by both Elmwood and Heineken as the key visual differentiator for the brand, the wordmark has been confidently updated for a new generation of consumers while staying true to the existing consumer base. Win-win for Tecate and single-win for us designers that get to enjoy the new branding.

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