EPISODE 016

SAL

IN CONVERSATION WITH

David Cano, Fernando Sagastume, Lucas Macchado, and Héctor Saracho, Interbrand Madrid

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 16 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on SAL — that's an acronym for Saudi Arabian Logistics — a hub providing ground handling and logistics services on a global scale linking land, air, and sea transportation and clearance to ensure the seamless movement of goods to, from, and through the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The project, designed by the Madrid, Spain office of Interbrand was posted on Brand New on March 11. It's a slightly older project than usual so you definitely want a refresher this time. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast016 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast016, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by four representatives of Interbrand Madrid: Héctor Saracho, Head of Strategy; David Cano, Creative Director; Fernando Sagastume, Design Director; and Lucas Macchado, Associate Director, Design.

In this conversation we get a glimpse of what an international project of scale across borders and cultures looks like and, well, it's not that

different from this Interbrand team's point of view. (Except we all know deep down it's not the same as designing for the yoga studio across the street from your office.) We also get to hear the goosebump-inducing story of how they arrived at a logo, pattern, and messaging that so perfectly linked SAL to Sea, Air, and Land. S. A. L.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Hector, David, Fernando, and Lucas.

ARMIN VIT Welcome to The Follow-Up today. We have a large gathering of Spaniards joining us all the way from Madrid to talk about a project in Saudi Arabia. So a very global episode today. Welcome to the show everyone.

HECTOR SARACHO Thank you Armin.

DAVID CANO Thank you so much for inviting.

LUCAS MACCHADO Hello Armin thank you for inviting us.

ARMIN Since we have so many people on the show. Could you tell our listeners your name and title?

HECTOR If you want I'll start Armin. So, my name is Hector Saracho and I am the Head of Strategy for Spain and Middle East region.

DAVID My name is David Cano, I am Creative Director at Interbrand Madrid.

FERNANDO SAGASTUME This is Fernando Sagastume Design Director in Madrid too.

LUCAS And this is Lucas Design Director at Madrid.

ARMIN Perfect. All right. So a lot of characters to keep track of, so we'll try to make it as simple as possible. So Hector, we're going to start with you. How did Interbrand become involved in this project? And maybe you can take a minute or two just to explain who Saudi Arabia logistics is.

HECTOR Sure. If I can start just by explaining briefly how we got involved in this wonderful project, SAL S-A-L, actually contacted us quite directly

to participate in a pitch project. So a tender project and, you know, they're kind of ask, or their aim was pretty simple or pretty complex depend on how do you look at it. But it was to craft the spinoff brand and I'll explain briefly what we mean by spinoff brand of Saudi Arabia Subsidiary, uh, Saudia Cargo. Right? So the airline for the Kingdom had a particular subsidiary that was in charge of ground handling and all the cargo activities for the airline, but they wanted to spin it off because they really need to craft a brand that could help the Kingdom and it's vision 2030.

Uh, I'm sure as your, you know, many of your listeners will know the strategic plan for the Kingdom is to diversify away from everything that's, you know, just oil revenues, so they'll get into entertainment, operations, uh, you know, different activities. And, uh, SAL was going to have a key role in kind of helping this diversification. And the key role meant being an enabler, offering reliable logistics, activating trade because of its utilization between Asia, Europe, and Africa. So in this sense, kind of the company was growing. It was about getting out from the airport, not only ground handling, but become a full-blown logistics hub. So warehousing full-blown logistics, e-commerce, and all the activities that they had to grow into. And in that sense, they contacted us, we got into a tender process and luckily we won and we were able to embark with them on this very incredible journey, which, you know, the ending off. And hopefully we're going to tell you that kind of the beginning, then the middle parts, so you can make the full puzzle.

Was the tender process a little bit different than usual coming from Saudi Arabia, based on other tenders that you have answered to in the past?

HECTOR So I think... I wasn't involved directly in the process because we have the people from New Business who are in charge of getting in touch with the clients and understanding their full needs. But as far as I remember, this was a while ago you know, it was a pretty standard

process in the sense of, you know, they gave us a brief detailing what they needed, which was 360 full-blown strategy design and implementation plan. And we got to it. So there wasn't any particular RFP from any other project we get from anywhere in the world, you know, they tell us what they needed and we were trying to see if Interbrand was a suitable partner for them, which luckily was, and you've seen what we were able to do for them, with their guidance, and their co-creation efforts.

ARMIN Got it. And last question for you in this part, Hector, uh, when you say it was a long time ago, just for context, can you tell us what year the

project started?

HECTOR Yeah, not that far ago. I think it's more not time-wise, but a lot of has happened since then. And it almost feels like, you know, last week was a month ago, but this project and maybe my colleagues can correct me if my mind is wandering, but it was, uh, around 2019. So not that far ago. And I think it was beginning of the year, or mid-year. I say a while ago, but not, not too, too long ago.

Yeah, 2019 seems so far off. So it does make sense that you'd be like, oh, it was such a long time ago because it's different lives nowadays. So David—I'm having a hard time going between Spanish pronunciation and English pronunciation of names—so David, is there something specific about the Madrid office, as opposed to say the London or Milan office that makes it a good fit for client in Saudi Arabia?

Well, first of all, you can call me David, no problem. But I think that nowadays we have the market experience. And also to be frank, I mean, we have momentum. I mean, this is word of mouth effect because we've been working in several projects, and for the last couple of years we have relevant cases. And also, we have also built long-term relationships with some clients. Which also helps this idea that sometimes the people move from one company to the next and they are calling us because they like what we did with them. On the other hand, I think that on a personal, let's say social level, we have

similar backgrounds, we also share the same family values, kind of empathy, and already have a good amount of market and cultural understanding that these estates. Another thing that I think that also helps when comparing with other countries and teams, it's also that we are, we have shown like this flexibility towards process, and which also helps to the region clients.

ARMIN And also just a little bit for my curiosity, was the tender specific to
Interbrand in Madrid, or was it more of a let's get Interbrand involved?

And then it was decided the Madrid office be the best one to take on it.

Madrid by default, and then it's up to us to decide if that's something that we take on our own or that we share and collaborate with other offices. And so any project that comes from the emirate region comes, comes to Madrid. Definitely.

ARMIN Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. We're going to go back to Hector and then we'll get to Lucas and Fernando. So Hector, what was the discovery phase like for you and your team in terms of learning about SAL's business and culture?

Sure. So I mean this discovery or under thing phase is quite important as you know, for us in strategy to really understand the full complexity of every project and then be able to synthesize the most important parts that can inspire the design team, which we will get to explain to you, you know, how they did their magic, uh, from our insights. But I mean, basically it was pretty standard in the way we approach because we feel this is the way it works as a field, the way we can get under the client's real needs and understand them. So it was comprised of interviews to top management from all parts of the organization. So, you know, the vision for the CEO, marketing and brand savviness of, uh, you know, of the people that are more in line with, uh, brand communications, we reviewed both primary and secondary research we had access to from clients. So getting our heads around, mainly the ambition of vision 2030, when it comes to logistics and how did SAL

play a connector role, uh, within that vision. Uh, and then we also had some co-creation workshops with the client where we were able to through different exercises, different dynamics, you know, understand more where they, where they saw the brand.

So as you can see, it's a mixture between more kind of rigorous analysis of industry reports, documentation, more conversations, where we get very interesting verbatims from management to where they want to take the brand, but also some sessions to co-create with them show the different things. We utilize different dynamics archetypes, for instance. So what would be the role and the archetype of the S-A-L brand, of the SAL brand, you know, with regards to brand strategy. And in terms of, you know, what their culture was, they were very, very ambitious, and for them, they came from almost seven decades of being part of Saudia, which is always the country carrier has a lot of prestige, has a lot of weight and they didn't want to lose that. So it's how we adapt those leadership credentials. And in fact, they had hired and sourced a lot of people and not only from KSA, but from different corners of the world to bring that leadership into the organization, right? And for us, I think it's important for your listeners to know just in the way we work for Interbrand, I think it's important to point out that throughout this immersion session, where we have to really understand what the client is about and why they want to take the company and the brand, there's always kind of representation from strategy, but obviously from design, from client service—so we have that three point triangle working in workshops in the interviews.

So everybody gets to listen in and participate from the client. And then last but not least, I wasn't able to go, but I know Fernando and some of the people from the team were able to participate, physically being able to be in Jeddah, which was one of the ground handling hubs and operations to really see them doing the work. Then, you know, actually getting down to business, moving things from one place to another, they were able to see the facilities that they have. Obviously they, they take care of dangerous materials. Sometimes they take care of

food, they care take care of animals, you know, anything that you can transport safely from one place to another that's of importance, they handle, they connect. So they were able to see operations firsthand, which is always great for the team who are going to be crafting the brand to really see them in action and get a feeling of how they work, how they operate, and that can feed into the creative process.

ARMIN

So, Fernando, since you had the opportunity to go there, what was your impression of seeing an operation like this and real person? I imagine it's somewhat impressive because I, I once went on a tour of the FedEx facilities in Memphis, Tennessee, and it's mind blowing. And I imagine that it's a fraction of what might have to go through a whole country.

FERNANDO

Yeah. Well, what most impressed me was the extreme, uh, the extreme weather they have to live in. How the temperatures like the lowest is 50 degrees during the day, how they have to take care of, uh, the people, the workers, the employees. And as, as Hector said, how they manage all these fragile things, all the, all this food, all of these medical stuff. So, so was impressive. And, uh, and the good thing is seeing how the situation was in the beginning of the project and then how they invest in order to improve and in order to set a brand new global hub in the region.

ARMIN And when you said the 50 degrees that is Celsius....

FERNANDO Celcius, yeah.

ARMIN So that's like 110 degrees Fahrenheit for sure.

FERNANDO In the most easy weather condition. So it's under the sun is crazy. The temperatures there.

ARMIN So Hector aside from extreme temperatures, what other strategic or actual strategic findings did you come out with from that initial phase?

FIGURE Sure. So I think if we had to summarize two things that I think echoed from strategy and they were beautifully taken in from the design team were two things, so kind of one I've briefly touched upon. So

the solidity factor of the brand. So obviously, you know, that they have a tradition of coming from an airline, which is very much the number one airline in the country has linked to the highest elements of the Kingdom. So the brand really needed to convey SAL and anyone who was this strength part, right? So leadership, strength, kind of that determination, even though they were creating a new space. So they're growing to full logistics, which meant, you know, more technology, more investment, more connecting the dots, but they really didn't want to lose this sense of, you know, we're, we're strong, we're determined. And we were here to be the leaders for the Kingdom, but opening up to the world in a new space, which is logistics, right?

So in the, in the workshops we co-created with them, we said, you know, one of the things we do is archetypes, which is just, you know, understanding what role the brand plays in kind of a universal themes in storytelling and overwhelmingly they chose the hero, which kind of makes sense. You know, the hero is the determined, but authentic protagonist, resourceful above all. And this was key for them. And you could, you know, shown out in the culture and the, and the way we talked to them, results oriented, right. You know, this really needed to be raising the bar in standard and logistics, not only for the Kingdom, but on a global scale, right? And that's where we came up with, you know, working with them, working with the hero archetype with a brand idea. But I think shines through very much in the work, which is delivering impact. So two words that very powerfully, you know, understanding delivery, not only in the physical functional sense of moving boxes, but in achieving things, right, getting the results you need and obviously impact is because they, you know, they want it to deliver impact, deliver results in everything they did. So that's one point so solidity and results driven. And the second one is very important as well, versatility. So the brand needed to work with partners. They needed to be able to connect to the likes of Amazon, the likes to Alibaba, they needed to really connect with different stakeholders, different partners, different technologies, different

platforms, and the brand needed to show that, that it had this almost polyhedrical and versatile characteristics. We've mentioned the type of products. So they're very versatile. They can, you know, they can move on and secure and protect kind of general cargo, but also like Fernando mentioned, pharma, perishable goods, foods, dangerous goods, you know, extreme valuables, live animals... So they really need to be able to deliver impact and results through all those categories. And then lastly, I think the versatility is the, you know, the brand needs to serve a multiple array of stakeholders. So the government entities obviously needed to be involved being a strategic sector. It is for the Kingdom, exporters and importers, other airlines, so you really need to have a brand that could be open enough and flexible enough and versatile enough to call out for these, these endeavors that they wanted to aspire to. So I think those two things that we had to say just to solidity and versatility, which are key insights that were very much infused in design.

ARMIN So, easy, right? You know, after all that you explained it seems like very complicated, brief to answer, but it's interesting. You can boil it down to two things, but when you unpack them, there's so much to them.

HECTOR True, there is a bit of a trick there.

ARMIN So Lucas, let's bring you into the conversation. With a strategy in place, and we're going to jump a little bit ahead into the actual solution of the logo and the name, so I am assuming it was hard work and thinking hard about it more than anything, but how did that magical moment happened when you connected the name Sal, which is S-A-L to both Saudi Arabia and logistics as an acronym and then Sea, Air, Land, S-A-L. It must have been very satisfying.

Oh yes. That moment. I won't deny it was very satisfying. And I think I'll never forget because, let's be honest, it's every brand designer dream, right? To pull off something clever out of a name, out of a logo. And I mean, we've all been there, right? Because you tried a hidden shape or you even try palindrome word, maybe it's perfect center letter, and

sometimes can be quite frustrating because you simply can't, you simply, like, it's just missing one letter... sometimes you get really close, but then you hit that wall. And if you push it too much, it gets like that feeling of trying too hard. So that's why I will never forget this moment. And fortunately that was, uh, not the case of hitting a wall, this connection between Sea-air-land and the name S-A-L. It didn't appear during the strategy phase because we were focused mainly on the brand idea, the brand personality, the archetype, and the name was there already given, right? So it was S-A-L for Saudi Arabian Logistics. So this idea actually came during the design phase, David, Fernando, and myself, we were sketching some ideas to translate this brand idea, the brand platform individuals, and we had like three main concepts.

And from this concept, we were sketching logo. And then Fernando actually drew this really bold logo. And we, the solution was connected to the archetype of the hero. So that's why it was really bold. We also have this, the value ah, boldness into the brand personality. And of course it strives for delivering impact. And this stencil style was related to the versatile business they have. And also these stencil styles., when you look to some cargo companies with the, with those containers, it has this look and feel. So then we agree that, okay, this is the logo that we think is really striking and we can, uh, it's powerful, we can develop it even further. So we started developing a system using the shape of the logo as building blocks. And usually we don't do patterns using the logo like, because it's too logo centric. But in this case, the logo was just like three letters. And the structure was really interesting. So we place it side by side and we came up with this SAL-SAL or even SALsa-SALsa. And it was already okay, we have something here, but then we stack it on top of each other and we saw, okay, now we can not read anything. It's just like some connections.

And this is where the things start to shine because I rotated this pattern, and I could see there's something here. I can see some waves

and some arrows, maybe airplanes in, Oh, look, roads. And then it clicked. I was like, Oh my God.

Yes, of course I have like sea, air, and ground—so close. And then I, I was by myself thinking again, hitting that wall. And then one second later I come on it's there, sea-air-land, and boom just clicked. I was blown away. I was like, my God. Finally, finally, we, I achieved that moment where everything that just connected, everything just tied in. So I immediately ran into the, into keynote. I took those patterns and I put it like an animation, like by sea, by air, by land. And then I would just zoom in, into this pattern and zooming out, just cropping that logo. And then I send this to the whole team. Everyone was blown away like, Oh my God was right in front of us. And we couldn't see. So I wouldn't say that in this connection, everything was pure luck, I think we were just prepared for it. I mean, we worked a lot, we worked hard. We were not seen at first, but then we just took our moment to see and we

ARMIN

realized this was there.

Yeah. I think it's the moment when you put metaphorically speaking pen to paper that you start making these connections that are before you, but you can't just see them when they're words or strategy documents. It's actually, when you start playing with them that you come to the solutions and I was actually, I got goosebumps from your story because it is kind of like a nice buildup of how one thing led to another, and another. And then all of saw sudden like Holy Cow, like I really landed no pun intended on something really unique that is memorable. And that is appropriate for the brand. It's funny because I usually say like, there was no magical moments in design. Like it's all about thinking hard and trying to connect the dots. But I think it's when you do those things that allow magical moments to happen. So every now and then I'm not a believer, but today I'm a believer, so thank you, Lucas. So David, what was the first round of explorations like with this project? Did you go far and wide with options or was it more of a single solution approach once you started playing with different things?

DAVID

Most of the time we try to link different options to different, let's say alternatives in the brand definition model. Doesn't make much sense to do different options, logotype or design system wise, if you don't have differences from the department point .that we have two different platforms, so our intention was to present two routes, which we did. We did much more exploration beforehand and had to narrow them guite fast. I mean, as the time for the visual presentation, we had like four or five days for our initial proposal, which is kind of crazy or including the weekend. So I remember that Fernando, Lucas, and myself were kind of carrying up, but we went far and wide with the applications and touch points. I think that that for us, it's important that the client understand that we want the client to realize the potential and possibilities of the idea. So it's not enough to show a logotype you have to go wide in that sense. In the end, I think that having less time sometimes is good. And in this case it was, I mean, we were happy with both routes presented even more when they pick the one that had a more, let's say global approach versus the one that, that was somehow more rooted in the local culture and symbology. It made sense it's a global ambition, and a company that even being local has to relate and connect with many other companies that are worldwide dance. And it seems, I think we hit the nail on the head. I mean, we didn't have many changes afterwards, as long as I remember, I think we did some color adjustments, but that's, that's it. That's the story.

ARMIN

So Fernando, what was the reaction like to that first round after that short, insane period of time? The way that I had goosebumps with a Lucaa story, now I have goosebumps like, Oh my God, designing a logo for a global company in four or five days, that's just different kinds of goosebumps. So how did the client react?

FERNANDO

As David said, it was really stressing and in the end, we have this interim presentation with the Head of Marketing and he validated the, design options. So there's some directions, and then a couple of weeks later, we improve and we develop a whole presentation. We send to

the board now, as you know, in these large corporation, you need to meet a lot of people, all the stakeholders. So, in their presentation, in Jeddah, the presentation in front of 15 or 16 people, the reaction was clear. We had a good to go with these second route. It was really exciting for them when they realized that they have a clear strategy and a super simple and smart solution for their identity, graphically.

ARMIN

And once they, you know, they approved the logo, they approved that direction... was there anything you had to do different in terms of developing a more complete identity that was different with this client being in Saudi Arabia in terms of applications, in terms of how you deliver the materials, things like that? And a lot of this has to do with my own curiosity about how it's different to work with a client in Saudi Arabia, to one for you in Madrid, to one for me in the U.S. or for most of our listeners.

FERNANDO

Not really any different on itself in this specific case, we had to be much more adaptive timing wise because as far as David said, we, we had to stress the presentation on all these phases, design faces. And then we had to meet really tight, retro timings. So, uh, as far as they want to launch internal and externally, and then I start all the architectural design or the implementation physically. So we needed to meet with this tight timelines and start delivering pretty quick, all the design assets, and in parallel developing guidelines. Yeah. It was really fun. A little bit of stressing because of the timing, but it was for the really interesting process.

ARMIN

And for implementation, does the client have a design team in house? Are they hiring a design firm? Are you in charge of any of the actual development?

FERNANDO

No. Our agreement was delivering all the guidelines, and then they implement in-house with their marketing department and also a local advertising agency that we met in our meetings there.

Wonderful. So Hector, did you and the client feel that the final design stayed true to the strategy? And it sounds like yes, but I want to hear from you.

Yes. It's a very big underlined yes. I mean, you've heard my colleagues discuss, I think if we go back to those two simple yet complex to, to deliver ideas, solidity, and versatility, I think both in the logo, but also the, you know, the, the visual expression and the dynamism it had, for sure it was, you know, something that everybody saw worked, and in this sense we always say that strategy inspires the design, but then, you know, in this project in the same as great projects we undertake, when you see the design actually coming to life, then really design makes the strategy tangible, real, so there's a kind of a feedback loop. So we inspire them. And then when we see their work, they give it body, they give it something that comes into the senses. Then it almost augments what we've done. So I think in a sense, everybody who was, who participated in the whole process, the workshops, the interviews, the strategy. And then when they saw the design, we're linking it back to all the conversations we've had. It just made sense. And I think it was, you know, everybody was congratulating everybody for their, you know, their efforts and the work.

ARMIN Yeah, definitely well-deserved congratulations all around, especially... also with the client, like seeing the potential in that solution and how well it applies to their, to what they do and their strategy. So the final question is going to go to all four of you. What is the most exciting aspect of this identity for both of you personally and how that relates to the client? We'll start with Lucas.

For me, it's not only about having the client happy because we were, of course, but also what I really like about this identity, because it's really unique and it's not like a big brand, it's a local brand trying to be global, but when we send it to you and you publish this work, it was amazing how the community received that work. And I, I mean, everyone here received emails from all of our colleagues around the world from other offices, but also from the competitors. I mean, they

were like also like, okay man, good job. I mean, this is like visually and delightful, right? For every designer. We had to present internally to host like a, we call it Interbrand Academy to show the behind the scenes because everyone wants to understand, okay, how you guys managed to achieve this goal. We also earn like a, an internal award also for this work. So that's, for me, it's a really great achievement because when you go to Brand New and you search for the comments, it's always like people. I mean, it's the fun part, right? Making mock of the kerning, or this looks like something. And at this moment, no, everyone was like really being positive. Even there's a meme, right on point, right? Talking about the logo, the pattern, and the name, and then even the website.com. That's S-A so for us, it's really nice when you have an identity like this, because sometimes when you're designing, we think, what would Armin say? I mean, don't go for Helvetica. Don't go for ellipses. So it's like an internal joke we had, especially with the Cologne office.

Yeah. I imagine other designers imagining myself on their shoulder, like a little devil, like don't you choose Helvetica. Hector's just flicking me off his shoulder. David, how about you?

We launched a brand that has to play in the global arena in a country that sometimes appears design-wise closely linked to local tradition. Saudi Arabia is striving with initiatives and projects that in a scale and scope go well beyond the frontier side, I think that our workforce truly reflects this. We saw the opportunity deliver a great solution. And of course the clients also recognize it and passed the green light.

ARMIN Wonderful. Fernando?

What was the most satisfying about delivering a nice, brilliant, and it's more than a solution for them. It's the satisfaction of the recognition. This year, we have an internal awards, all the offices present the project, and then we received an iconic award. It's called Iconic at Work from the Interbrand network. So their internal recognition in the

company, recognition in the social part, as you see in your blog was really nice having all this feedback.

ARMIN And Hector, if there's anything else left to say, how about you?

Sure. Just, uh, just a quick one. I think apart from receiving, you know, the love and admiration from colleagues, we have been in meetings since then with other great companies and great projects in the Kingdom that have started out saying, by the way, congratulations, what you did with SAL, we really liked it or, you know, some people that were in the launch of the event. So it's all a great to have, not only the client, not only our colleagues, but other potential clients recognizing great work and congratulating us for it. So I think that's also something we should be very proud of. You know, the reputation in the region is strong and we get congratulated by, by other potential opportunities.

ARMIN Well, it's definitely wonderful to hear they have such good reception internally, from other clients, from the region about the work. Because I do think there is something very special about it in the sense that it captured not just what the company does, but was able to translate it into a design that, that sort of felt in a way natural, but also very serious, very corporate in a good way that, you know, this was a company that you may have never heard of before, but from the start, it was like, take it seriously. Like this is a company that values design, that values process that it just looks like it's very well put together. So all the praise is well-deserved and I want to thank all of you for being on the show today, and sharing your afternoon in Spain with me, and with our listeners. So thank you so much again for being on The Follow-Up.

HECTOR Thank you, Armin.

DAVID Thank you so much Armin, great to be here.

LUCAS Thank you very much, Armin.

FERNANDO Hasta pronto! Muchas gracias.

While for Interbrand Madrid working in Saudi Arabia may come somewhat naturally, it's clear that they have ample understanding of the cultural and economic forces at play. Allowing them to deliver a solution that is confident yet modest and that establishes SAL as an integral gear that keeps the world turning, even when the action on the ground takes place at 50 degrees Celsius, 122 degrees Fahrenheit. In other words: Hot stuff. Both the weather AND the work.

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