

EPISODE 043

PETCHOY

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Duy N, M — N Associates

AND

M Lan, M — N Associates.

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 43 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Petchoy, which offers fresh prepared meals for cats and dogs. Based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, the company was founded by two self-described young people who perfected their recipes over the course of five years to provide specialized nutritional formulas from experienced veterinarians through high-quality fresh ingredients with no additives or preservatives.

The project, designed by Ho Chi Minh City-based M – N Associates, was posted on Brand New on October 26, 2021. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast043 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast043, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Duy N, Partner and Creative Director at M — N Associates and M Lan, Partner and Project Manager at M — N Associates.

We start off this conversation with a brief inquiry into what the design business landscape is like in Vietnam and, despite the growing competition, it sounds like an exciting place to be for both creatives and clients. From there we delve into how the founders of Petchoy had a quick realization, only after a year of being on the market, that their previous design was working against them. And we learn how M – N Associates worked methodically and also joyfully — bringing in over 20 cats and dogs for a photoshoot at one point — to create a youthful new identity and packaging for a Gen Z audience.

Now let's listen in as Armin follows up with Duy and Lan.

ARMIN VIT Hello, everyone and welcome to The Follow-Up. Today we have a pretty exciting episode for a couple of reasons. One is because we're going to talk about pets. I love cats. I love dogs. Talking about pets is exciting. Then we also have the aspect of M-N Associates joining us from Vietnam. It is exciting to have someone from this part of the world. We usually have guests from the US and London, so it's a nice change of pace. And we're going to talk about pets. So, no matter where you are, if we're talking about pets, it's going to be great. Duy, Lan, welcome to The Follow-Up.

DUY N Hi, thank you very much for having us here. Super excited to be on your process.

M LAN We're really happy to be here.

ARMIN So, I want to start by asking you a little bit about Vietnam. I already mentioned that that is one of the aspects of why I'm so excited about this podcast episode. But, before we get into the PetChoy project, I would love to hear about what it's like to be a small design firm in Vietnam. What is your business like? What kind of clients do you work with? Do you find it difficult to sell your expertise? And I know that's a lot of questions to start up front with. So anything that you can hit in those numerous questions, that would be great.

LAN This remind us back into 2015. This was quite challenging for us to start our design studio in Vietnam. We start just the two of us working at our apartment, and now we have a team working on different branding project from retail to corporate. Consumer brand, to luxury brand. But to be honest, that it's not easy to sell our service here. The only way that we have it to do our best for each project on the design, production, and strategies. And then that we use case to present to the new client. So one by one, we prove ourselves. And now we getting more interesting client coming in with cool project to work with.

DUY Yeah, it was really hard at first to convince clients for believing in our way, because clients in here usually [inaudible]. It's safer that way. And we totally understand it. Our process requires more conversations to understand what the true problem or the strategy requirement behind. And we continuously improve the process after every project. Like, getting closer to the clients, or stronger relationship before starting the projects. And we try our best not to be burn out by accepting only the amount of project we could handle to deliver the best quality. On the other hand, we keep our services with new challenges, new categories, or new customer audience, to understand to [inaudible], to come up with ideas. Every project come out is from my self to our team that we didn't create anything.

ARMIN And have you gotten any attention from clients outside of Vietnam? Or are they all local?

DUY Since now we got attention from global. Actually we got offer from many countries. But we try to keep it that we can deliver the best quality as we can. So, some likely recently we took our local and we try to and embrace the local design, the local brandings into a different level that we expected.

ARMIN And that's just more difficult to do with clients in other parts of the world, I'm guessing.

DUY Yeah, yeah, yeah. It could be, dependings on the teams and the managements on timelines and everything else. But we have international partners to work with, to deliver the better quality for Vietnamese designs.

ARMIN And another question related to the design industry in Vietnam. Are there a lot of designers? Do you have a lot of competition, that you have to work against to get those clients?

LAN They're quite a lot.

DUY Yeah. Right now the competition is getting hard, I can say. More young studio coming in the market every days. We saw many studio coming in our time, they now is growing into agencies, or digital agencies working with big brands.

LAN Yeah. Even us when we do the preparing for consumer plan. So we have a pitch in with the agency. This mean that a lot of job and a lot of a brand studios-

DUY Yeah. A lot of more opportunities open up, and the competition is getting hard, and design in Vietnam is really catching up with the latest technologies. So you have now foundries in Vietnam, you have now studio making custom type, digital applications, explorations.

ARMIN Yeah. I think it comes with a territory that the more prevalent design services become, and the more celebrated the design industry is by clients, that competition grows. It goes both ways. It's both good and bad, but it's great to hear that for the most part it's been good. Now, after covering a handful of your projects over the years, one recurring theme is the high-end production of many of the materials that you create. Is this normal for many clients in Vietnam? And how, and where, do you get so many beautiful objects printed and produced?

DUY The industry we have been working with on, mostly require high standard of customer experience. The client always want to put themselves as customer of their brand. So that makes us have to take

care of every brand touch point seriously. Luckily we have a master production in our firm, Ms Lan here, she's the one behind making all possible in here, not just about making the impossible possible, but also addressing the process it needed to get the completions for the whole collateral suit, if we could have to sacrifice this or that. But overall, it's all about the consistency and timeline.

LAN Luckily that, because I used to be an assistant for a Japanese contemporary artists here. I had a great experience on the production and I really understood how the important of the production on each project. It mean that I want to do my best for our client. It's not easy at first. We have a usually make a sample to convince the client to go with the better solution on the production, although it costs more. I must say some Vietnamese supplier are really talented, but it's hard to convince them for trying new things. It's not easy, to be honest is not easy. Sometimes we have it to be there for days, and weeks, to make sure that every step's coming out right, because it's hard, some production that we cannot make here in Vietnam. So we have to work abroad with the Italian, French, or Chinese, the production companies.

ARMIN Well, the hard effort has really paid off. And I have to say that the images that come out of your projects are just wonderful. And I think maybe that's part of that experience with the artistic company that you were with, in that there's a certain artsiness to those photos that is not common. Most people just shoot projects in a studio shot, or next to a nice background, but you are sort so carefully art directed, and beautifully presented. Is that part of your offering and how you budget projects? That even the photography of the final product is part of your process?

DUY Honestly, it's my passion, because my background is multimedia system. And me and Lan really, really want to taking care of the final outcome of every project. We have to make it all agree to each other. We want it to be meaningful from the top to the bottom. So the showcase, the packagings, the shooting, the alterations that we put paws on it, we

want it to be connected from the original concept of the brands, to the images that show it for each brand and bring it to the customers to show them how each project we did have a soul in it. And it's going to be different on the market.

ARMIN Well, mission accomplished. Everything looks great from start to finish. So let's talk now about PetChoy. How did you get involved in this project?

LAN One of the founder came to us with a plan to expand their business, to be the top of pet food in Vietnam. We still haven't seen any for Vietnam on pet industry. That is not enough comparing with the international prime. So we took the project. We really like to differentiate from each of the project. So it's mean that when a pet project, and a new industry, so we both agreed that we took that project.

ARMIN And how did the client find you?

LAN They follow us on Behance, we thinks. Yeah, because of Vietnamese they're very familiar with Behance.

DUY Yeah.

ARMIN And it seems that... from what I read online, the founders, they're young, right?

DUY Yeah. They're really young. Gen-Z generations.

ARMIN Yeah. And with that said, they also seem to be a young company in that they were only founded in 2020, I believe. Why did they want to redesign so soon after launching?

DUY After running the branding for a year, they witnessed their current brand have serial issues on the brand awareness. It was highly recognizable on shelf. even the product quality is quite good, the selling part keep going down when they sharing for us. They figured out that it is the whole design system, and came to us for a better sustainable rebrand. I remember, it was a really long meeting for conversations. And we talk over to really understand that: the current brand directions, the visual

system, the communication language is not connected to the others, even not relevant to the target customer.

ARMIN And is this something that the founders realized? Or is that something that you help them find through that conversation?

LAN I think that they realized it.

DUY They realized it after a year. They put a lot of effort to running the business, and it keep not growing as they is expected, even they have really good idea from the beginning. But it's still going nowhere.

LAN The product is not new in the market. The quality is really good, but the way that they do the marketing imagery and branding, it doesn't work. So they really want to do something much more better than that. He came to us, asked us for the solution for that.

ARMIN And did they give you any specific direction in terms of what kind of mood, what kind of personality they wanted? Or were they just more, we don't know what to do. Help us figure it out.

DUY They filled out the requirement brief from us with some of their personal interest case. They wanted something that more vet influence, with the character illustration like dog and cat running around on a minimal, nice, clean graphics, not too many colors. But through the conversations, we had led to another solution that to review the company instructions with an aspect of a restaurant vibe, to bring the high quality food into the center of the brand. And they agree with it, so then we come back to our studio and do reshoots and find out how we going to do with this.

ARMIN So that's actually a perfect segue into my next question. You go back to your studio. What does that process look like? Once you get that initial brief from the client and start to design things?

DUY The process could be generally the same, but in details, every decisions lead us through a new journeys. I always start, or try to shake things a bit for every project. This is get me to get more. And I usually focus on

the main problem first, to divide them first, and then solve it. After doing the work on researching and talk to the clients, or really understand about their brand, the market. Then we expand the complete brand system so that we could imagine from the single problem to how the system going to be on every brand touchpoint. Then we usually offer them more to see the bigger picture. And then after all the clients, the brand element are declared we divide task into the teams, our partners to build brand elements, like the custom type with TypeType Foundries and all, maybe we are arrange the whole three day shootings to covering all possible media access for the packagings and the digital access, which Mr. Wing Chan, one of the top photographer here. So, we don't try to limit ourselves and we try to approach different creative talents to help us different points of the projects.

ARMIN For the initial round of design explorations do you usually show just one approach, and try to show it as comprehensively as possible? Or do you show multiple design options to the client?

DUY At first round, we have a really detailed exploration on how everything's going to be connected, from the logo to the applications. We try to cover as much as we can sometimes though, beyond their expectations. Like we create a series of printed items, or collaboration merchandise with other brands on the market. Or maybe showing them how the interior direction is going to be. And depending on the strategies we respond with the relevant options. Sometimes it's going to be from two to three directions. But for me, ideally it's two. And we usually present it with a very opposite concept. So the clients can be comparing one and another. Usually start to define the concept for each options first, and really give a start on end graphic. So it could be a series of pins or tasks to present within the teams. And if the direction is right and we jump into all the brand elements, before we present it to the clients.

ARMIN And in this case, how close was one of your original design explorations to the final design?

DUY Not just this case, usually it's quite close. More like 90 or 95% close.

ARMIN Wow.

LAN Yeah, because we took more than a month for the first presentation. So usually, we details presentation. So it's 90% close.

DUY We covering all the content within the markups, the application to show to them how everything's going to be connected from designs to the communications. We repairs everything. If time running short, we could run deadlines in like three weeks. But we try to limit that to not burning out.

LAN From the design to the application, and even sometimes online solution, social media, etc.

ARMIN And since we all sort of know what the final design was in this case, what did the opposite design option you presented look like? In broad terms, you don't have to get into very specifics. But how was it different from the final wordmark with the waggy tails in the inktraps?

DUY For PetChoy, we have the other option is very minimal, cute, with just two main color. And this have a dog and a cat running around on a packaging layouts at they expected. And it's really easy to execute and manage. Only, just purely graphic elements. It's nothing hard to understand, just purely the concept they want. We do it to make sure if they don't go crazy like us, they're going to have something safe and nice, easy for them to release on the market.

ARMIN And what was the client's reaction like to the two options?

DUY After we present the first option, they like it. It was really expected that we meet the expectation. But then the second one presented and they were really impressed. It's nothing like anything in their current market. And they ask carefully about the pros and cons for each direction, but we convince them it should be unit for the brand to impress the market easier. Although it's achieve this direction, it's not

easy. After careful discussion, back and forth for a week, it's going to be executed and planned. So they agreed to go with our directions.

ARMIN So they agreed to go with that direction that we all saw online. And you already mentioned that the design was pretty close from exploration to final solution. So maybe somewhere in between the exploration and the final solution, how difficult was it to get the wagging tails in the wordmark right? Was it a painful process? Or did it come somewhat easily? For some reason you were really good at putting tails in letters.

DUY <Laughter> Honestly, it's not easy. I do really love typography, but to achieve it, it had to be going through of the original things. I had to give away my clingy idea of getting close to their original logos, which is very plain. But the negative dog and cat shapes on their previous symbol made me want something that have pet like character in size. And the brand name is short and easy to spell, so I don't need this bowl anymore. And you try to make everything into the logotype iconic enough. But to find the right typeface and have fun characters, forms, and inktraps, or whatever it is on the type, it maybe took me walking through around 40 to 50 type choice and cat sketches, and consideration between the capitals or normal versions. Only TT Trailer remains when we reveal around with teammates, and even with this line to see from the customer eyes and agree. And then we push it further to get all the details on the wagging tails, on the ear rings, on the inktraps, into places and test it for some rounds or make everything balanced before showing to the clients.

ARMIN It's reassuring to hear that it was difficult, in a good way. <Laughter> Because in the end it comes across as so playful and effortless that, you forget that it is not common for fonts to have waggy tails in them. You also worked with TypeType to develop a full alphabet. What was that process like, working with them?

DUY We worked on the name of the main product is Fresh Pet. And that was the original versions, the one that they don't choose. And they told me

why don't we go fully Vietnamese for this options? So I changed the product name into thú cưng tươi which is the literally translation of the Fresh Pet. I feel like it's not really there yet. And the team concept is about the restaurant food. So we changed it one more time into Bua An Tuoi, which is the fresh meal, before showing to the clients on the first round. And the new product name, make the team decided to approach TypeType for special Vietnamese versions of the TT Trailers. And we called TT trailers PetChoy and it carries on the petline diacritical design and is from our design director ideas that we don't do normally from the TypeType and TT trailer is more. And our team own pet owner, so they really got super excited for the process.

And they came up with all kinds of diacritical designs for giving to working, pairing with TypeType. And we had to limited our a lot to make it right on the whole entire typeface. The process was really condensed and accurate. TypeType were very supportive with their skillfull in the fonts engineerings. Together we achieved the closest similar kernings to the operational, which is very nice because we can add in a lot of content on the packagings, even any brand applications. And because the Vietnamese content is way longer than English it needs more letters. And I must say the combination of the font, and adapt to the medium slide show, so social media post and everything else is amazing. Every time we type it out, it's really fun and visually appealing.

ARMIN Yeah. It must be fun to just type it out and write things related to pets. Switching to packaging, what were some of the technical or production related requirements for it? Were there any shipping constraints, or storage issues that you had to keep in mind when designing the packaging?

LAN Compared with the old packaging, the new container box that were change to be more premium and could be reused. The structure of the packaging cover has to be changed. We have to calculate it, the new dieline for it, and try several times at things. To make sure that it fits

nicely and its work. We did the laminated and flattened the cover, easy for shipping, storage, and cold display.

ARMIN And I probably should have asked this first, did the new structure of the packaging come from you? Or did it come from the client?

LAN The new structure is from us.

ARMIN Okay.

DUY Originally they just want a sticker on the airpress plastic bag to save costs. But then we explain to them for a better investment to reclaim their position on shelf. So that's what they originally want. We proposed them to use decent container plastic box to apply for the reuse purpose. And maybe you running for the reuse campaigns later on. And after we discussion around, they all agreed to use the container box, and then we create the cover, as we original presented on the concept. It had more faces on the shelves to show the brands.

ARMIN That's a pretty impressive jump, convincing them from going from a really simple, cost-saving solution to a more custom version. And further in that question, how did you source the packaging? Is this something that existed? Or just completely from scratch, and you had someone create the packaging as a new structure?

LAN The box is existing one, but the paper cover, that we did.

DUY Yeah. It depend on different projects, but for this one, they still going back with the costing. So we have to find the supplier that have the current plastic box appropriate for their measurement for the food. The, rest it was, just do that really nice packaging cover to put it on shelf.

ARMIN And was the supplier also in Vietnam? I know these are very technical, detailed questions, but I'm just intrigued by how you source all this kind of stuff.

LAN The supplier here in Vietnam. Yeah. There's a lot of supplier here, to be honest, that Vietnamese can do a lot of things.

DUY Yeah. For plastic, it's no problem. The plan is further, we create their own mold for their own original plastic box, and redo the whole system. But for the first phase, they want something sharp and ready to launch immediately. We have news on a coffee already and then do the supplying for the current packaging. It's nice.

ARMIN Yeah. That makes sense. And especially when you consider where they wanted to go and where they ended up, and then where you want to take them, it's all a matter of baby steps. First, you convince them that they need something nice. Then you convince them, now you need something really, really nice and custom for you. Excited to see how that evolves over time. Now, one of my favorite elements of the identity and packaging is the ticket motif that looks like a dog just placed their order in a restaurant. How did you come up with that idea?

DUY Thank you. It's really funny that the idea came up to me when I watching Gordon Ramsey and holding the tickets and yelling on Hell Kitchens. <Laughter> And then I did some research to recognize the ticket is very important communication motive in the professional kitchens. I want that concept, my concept to have that live. So I chose a font from Google Fonts that look like it came out from a thermal printer, and then put on ingredients on it. So the packaging speak to itself that it feel like this is the take out cook from Michelin restaurants.

ARMIN That's funny. It's so great to hear. The things that influence our designs, you never know where it's going to come from. And if it's Gordon Ramsey screaming at people in the kitchen, that's even better.

LAN Yeah.

ARMIN Now another serious issue that I want to talk about is, how in the world did you achieve the paws of the pets, touching the bowls? And I mean, I already know that the answer involves Photoshop somehow, but from concept to execution, how did those pet paws come into play?

DUY Yes. We have to use Photoshop. The pet did use their paws to draw in the food, but it is impossible to capture it. We always want the tempting

feeling on the design, so in very subtle way, we went through the different ideas and decided not to use the dog or cat portraits—it's too clichés. After watching so many pets and videos, its on our team to be part of it, we have sections of people watching pet videos during working times. And suddenly one of our friends sent us a video that his dog was stealing food from the other dog, by throwing bowl toward his side. And then we knew right away, this is something what we want. And our designer, Anh Nguyễn came up with the idea that shooting as many paws as we can to make the packagings go dynamic and interesting. And then the whole team managed to shoot with cuteness overload sections.

DUY We were lucky to invite enough talents and they were very cooperative. And Mr Wing Chan did an excellent job by shooting the paws stuff, the lifestyle shoot, and food stuff during the three days long. And it's not like you could shoot every paws each day. You had to shoot it all on the set, where the talents arrive. It's like you shoot the paws here, and then you go back to the shoot lifestyle, and then you shoot the food right after it. And then the new talents arrive. You have to redo it all over again.

ARMIN I love how we're talking about cats and dogs as talent. This is why I was excited to talk about this project, just because pets are amazing. And it's also great to hear about how, looking at cat videos paid off. How funny is it that a cat, or a dog is stealing another bowl? And from there comes a great idea that really makes the packaging... It makes you part of a scene, like something is happening. There's an actual cat or dog in there doing something. How many talent came into the studio? Do you have like 20 dogs and cats? 30?

LAN I think the cat is more than dog. Dog is around 10, cat is 15 to 20. I think.

ARMIN Easier to get cats than dogs.

LAN It's crazy. But it's crazy because that we have to schedule mix of talent with their owner, just 15 minutes, 30 minutes, something like that.

DUY We try not match up their schedule to each others, or we are afraid that the talents is going to be fighting on the scenes.

LAN And the dog is so excited.

DUY Yeah. And the dog is really super excited to run around. And it's hard to catch them for the paws. Only the food calmed them down. It's literally something that we saw on the scenes and bring it to the designs.

ARMIN That's great. It will create memories for years to come.

LAN Yeah.

ARMIN So you have a logo, identity, you have a great set of typefaces, great set of colors and the packaging in place. How do you help PetChoy strategically, to relaunch the brand and bring it to market, again.

LAN We have a memorable story behind the launching. We launched a new image of the branding during lockdown, our city, because COVID. Only city service was opened. We cannot do any campaign for launching at that moment. We choose the easiest way that sending out sample to KOL, micro-influencer, friends... we collected their response and offered them spread now, here via social media. The plan was booming, much more than expected during COVID. That, and the cool, the meaningful content, with the nice typography and packaging... ask them to give a try, really effective.

ARMIN Now that, I mean, I don't want to say COVID is over, but now that sometime has passed and we're sort of learning to live with it. How is the brand performing in the market? If you know.

DUY I could say triple the sales revenues comparing to their previous brands, and the brand awareness keep going up. I hear people talking about PetChoy more gradually. And I saw it on the shelf from wholesales more widely. And more of the wholesales coming in. Right?

LAN Yeah. A lot of wholesale coming in, asking for selling PetChoy.

ARMIN That's great to hear. Now in all of this, what was the overall input reaction and impression from the people at PetChoy, including the final identity and the packaging? And also what was their involvement like? Were they very involved? Were they more like hands off, and just call us when it's done?

DUY They were quite concerned about the decision to go, type involved. Sometimes during we craft in the font, and we totally understand the point, we convince them again to believe this strategy directions, and we have to keep them posted every step we achieve. Like showing them the completion of the font, give them a little bit trials. We guide them on the shooting sessions and the printing sessions. And the more they understand, and the more they see the real results, the more they believe the relaunch is going to be great. Also they pointed out during the designs that, the overall design is somethings to indicate the difference between dog food and cat food, rather than just the contain. Before it just the name for dog or cat, and then our designer came up with the dog and the cat characters. And the idea is that hidden in the letter [inaudible] PetChoy, which is appearing on the packagings.

ARMIN Were they happy with the final result?

DUY Yeah, I think so. They haven't talked about it anymore, from when we put it on the characters.

ARMIN What was the most exciting aspect, for each of you, working on this project?

DUY For me, we have a really engaging and exciting process to create this brand from top to bottoms, from the logos through the application. And then it make us feel right for accepting this challenge, that rebranding PetChoy. And every day I saw new ideas coming out from my team, on new contents, inspiring from the internet coming out and rebranded it into the PetChoy ways. The funny thing is that all the copywritings, will make my design. He got great sense of humor, Gen-Z's language. It show the power, the right typography that we created.

And it push every symbol, copywriting becomes meaningful and characters, like some people say on the internet as the friend is really connected to the customer, look like it's alive itself.

LAN To me, as I mentioned, and that we launching during COVID lockdown. So the marketing plan, the shooting plan, the launching plan, and even trading plan has to be changed right away to fit with the new situation at that moment. During lockdown, all the customers stay at home, so they spend a lot of time with their pet. So our rebranding got the great response on that.

ARMIN Although, something I should have asked earlier. Do you have pets?

LAN No.

DUY Honestly, no. We love it, but she's have allergies so we can't have it.

ARMIN Did the project make you reconsider? Maybe you want one or two cats, or 15?

DUY Is all I always wanted.

LAN You really like pets. <Laughter.>

DUY Yeah. Either cat or dogs. I love it. But this brand is created, come from our passion, my hidden passion that wants a pet and want to treat them right. <Laughter.>

ARMIN Well, that's wonderful. I want to thank you both for joining me on the podcast today, and listening to all these great stories about how the project came to be. It's always fun to hear about those unexpected sources of influence that inform a design, and everything about this is playful and enjoyable. And again, when pets are involved, it's hard to go wrong and you got it very right. Duy, Lan, thank you so much for joining me on The Follow-Up today.

DUY Thank you, for having us.

LAN Thank you.

DUY Thank you for having us. Have a good day.

BRYONY It's always great to hear designers speak passionately about their craft. A trait that is evident in M — N Associates' work from start to finish, whether it's drawing dog tails into letters or photographing the final packaging to present it online. And whenever an identity is influenced by internet cat videos you know that plenty of fun was had in the process of making it. More rare though is when an identity is influenced by watching Gordon Ramsey scream at cooks in Hell's Kitchen. So... one key takeaway from this episode is that it's okay to watch things that seem pointless as part of your design process.

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