

Media graphics: Not a straight line proposition

Alternate materials, truncated budgets call for another kind of creativity, reports Dan Daley

The downsizing of the music industry (watched nervously by a film industry about to feel similar effects) was softened to some extent by how technology allowed recordings to be made more efficiently and cost-effectively. Digital hard disk recorders and samplers cut a lot of zeroes off production budgets. When it comes to the art and packaging for those music productions, however, designers have also been looking for ways to adjust to a considerably more frugal environment.

When Stan Stanski and Phil Yarnell, partners in the independent packaging graphics firm SmayVision in New York City, were asked to design a package for a new Jimi Hendrix boxed set, their original concept of purple velvet, inspired by the guitarist's flamboyant stage garb, ran into the realities of record company budgets.

"We wanted velvet, we got Suedelux [a faux material made by UK company NevTek]," says

Stanski. "It was a cost issue, and that pretty much defines how you approach graphics for music packaging these days."

Packaging and graphics designers at content companies have always had to balance esthetics with economic realities, but in the six consecutive years that music products have shown relentless declines in sales, and the levelling off of entertainment video products in the last two years, those realities have become harsher. Mergers of media giants such as Sony and BMG have produced tens of thousands of personnel redundancies, many of which have affected graphics departments. This has led to an even greater reliance on outsourced designers, but they too have to contend with truncated budgets and the scheduling exigencies of ever-tighter time-to-market windows.

"Working till the wee hours of the morning is not unusual for an independent graphics house," says Yarnell. "It always was but now more so than ever. You have to get the work done on time and on budget, even though there's less time and less budget."

The other major trend designers have to contend with is the impact that retail is having on design esthetics and ergonomics. Big-box retailers like Costco, Target and Wal-Mart have redefined the dynamics of physical media at retail, including the nature of the packaging design. "What's happening with a lot of boxed sets is that the retailer whose store demographic is determined to be the most likely sales group for a particular product becomes part of the design process," comments Howard Fritzon, vice president of design for Sony BMG's Legacy group, which is

charged with repackaging the label's hits into new configurations. "Each big-box chain doesn't get its own design – at least, not yet," he adds. "But the design is now created with the main vendor venue in mind and with the expectation that it will be workable for other chains, as well."

(While it's still rare, some packages are created with just one store in mind, such as Garth Brooks' deal with Wal-Mart. Signed in 2005, Brooks' music is being repackaged using

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new graphics designs and sold solely through Wal-Mart stores.)

Boxed sets have long been one of the most flexible aspects of an increasingly and rigidly standardised industry, but the big-box chains are affecting that. Fritzon notes an elongated multi-disc Econo-Digi box configured with three CD welds and a fourth for a booklet that's become a favorite at Costco, which has configured some of its racking around them for titles from artists like Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson. "The front of the box is about twice the size of a normal CD case," Fritzon says of the 5 x 10-inch packages. But more critical was the fact that the design was done in conjunction with Costco itself. "When we did layouts of the package and the graphics they were run by Costco to see if they found it appealing," he says. Some of that feedback included suggestions to make the colors bolder and the type larger.

(Graphics designers also mourn the loss of major music-centric retailers, such as Tower Records, which closed last year. "Competition between CD and DVD packages within that kind of environment was one thing," says one designer. "But at least people came to those places with the express purpose of looking for music and videos. In the big-box retailers, though, we have to design packaging that competes with bathroom products and candy. At Wal-Mart, music and movies are just another product.")



The Jimi Hendrix boxed set was made of Suedelux, not velvet



The Jerry Lee Lewis packaging revealed very little about what was inside the box

“Designers have always had to get the approval of designs from the labels and the artists, but this is a new element in the process: the major retailer,” says Fritzon. “It’s one of the ways the business has changed.”

Value-added content has become de rigueur in packaging; in addition to additional discs – CDs or DVDs – buyers are looking for other elements, usually new text in the form of essays and other printed material on the artists or the projects. Communicating that on the cover graphics, however, could detract from the impact of the overall design. SmayVision’s designs of packages for Jerry Lee Lewis, Scorpions and a forthcoming AC/DC boxed set actually reveal very little about everything that’s inside the box. Instead, says Stanski, the package has to reach out to the consumer on a visceral level and be compelling enough to pick up and handle, so that the interior contents can be revealed on the back of the package. In the process, the buyer interacts with the package on a tactile basis. “Embossing with foil on a slip case has become a very good way to introduce a sense of touch to the package and still leave plenty of room to list the contents on the back,” says Stanski.

Some of the older standbys of special packaging are rarely seen anymore, victims of budget crunches. “No one ever mentions lenticular anymore,” says Stanski, adding that the same goes for actual wood and metal

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components, much of which have been replaced by foil or other man-made materials on paperboard. He estimates that he has seen packaging graphics budgets slashed by 50% since 2000. Fritzon has felt the same economic pain, but adds that major labels will green-light special packaging materials if the feel they can make back their investment in it. Another way designers can go about it, says Fritzon, is to present the design in stages, as a good-better-best type of menu, and for certain projects use more than one level of packaging. That’s what Columbia Records did with the Johnny Cash *Legends* boxed set. “Two versions of the package came out, one very lavish and the other not as much but less expensive,” he explains. Not surprisingly, more of the inexpensive versions were sold, but the deluxe version acts as a kind of flagship for the

product, getting the overall project more attention, he says.

Green is good, but hard

‘Green’ materials are already becoming a force in many industries, but packaging designers suggest that that’s not a simple proposition for entertainment packaging. “There are not a lot of well-established alternative materials products out there,” says Hans Neubert, managing director of strategic design firm VSA Partners’ New York City office. However, he adds, he expects environmentally friendly packaging materials will become more of a force in design in the near future. “But not because of consumers or product producers,” he says. “Instead, it will likely be artists of high stature that will specify it, and begin to do so more publicly.”

Fritzon says his firm has been searching for the ideal green package but has yet to find it. “The materials available now for the most part look biodegradable, which is to say they don’t look very good,” he says. “[Recycled] paper tends not to take ink as well as virgin paper does, and the same for coatings.”

Another trend in packaging design that Neubert has spotted is the increase in more elaborate artwork. This, he says, serves two purposes: product differentiation and anti-counterfeiting, and he views this as a very concrete development because it gets at the economics of packaging as well as its esthetics. “As long as it can be put on paper, it can be copied, so it becomes a matter of making it more difficult to copy,” he says. “That will help protect profits because it both cuts down on piracy and also because it helps justify a higher price proposition to consumers. The trick is to use every technique you can and apply it to paper to keep the costs reasonable,” including embossing, foil stamping and thermo-chromatic inks. “All of this has been available for a long time, but I expect we’ll see a lot more combinations of these techniques being used as a way to combat counterfeiting.”

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Packaging for the Scorpions boxed set was designed to get prospective buyers to pick it up



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Neubert says budgets for design have been squeezed lately and will likely continue to be so, especially for record label projects. But the increased use of optical media by non-traditional companies – VSA Partners' clients include companies like Harley Davidson motorcycles and Wilson sport equipment – will help offset that, as will the increased migration of the actual printing to lower-cost operations in China and Mexico.

Another technology cited by Neubert is laser die cutting, which will enable more intricate

packaging design that can also be accomplished faster and more cost-effectively. "That kind of design goes right from the designer's computer to the laser cutter's computer, so it's much more efficient," he says. "The ability to do intricate die-cutting will also influence my choices of materials, I believe, in the future."

Package design is subject to the same colour trends that affect everything from paint to iPods. Neubert says that green – the colour, not the environmental concept – is hot this year, a fact confirmed by any number of current shelter and fashion magazines. "It has replaced orange as the leading pop color," he says.

The colours are about all that change on the packaging for *That's What I Call Music*, the best-selling multi-label compendia of hits, of which two dozen have been released in the US, joined by two Latino music editions and three years' worth of Christmas CDs. "What surprises me about them is that they sell so well so consistently in an age of downloads," says Stanski. SmayVision devised a 3D-type graphic for the package that has stuck with it for all the releases. "It's become part of the brand," he says. "I think that as discs are used more for compilation products like this, the graphical design is going to be a more important factor because it will be used to establish the brand and make it more recognizable and competitive on the shelf."

Designers will have to contend with opposing dynamics as packaged media enters its next cycle: they will be asked to make some packages more lavish and others more austere, such as some new-artist releases in which Universal Records eschews booklets altogether in favor of a Web link for buyers to download printed material. "We're going to see more and more standardization of the boxed-set sizes as a result of pressure from big-box retailers," says Fritzon. "But those same boxes are going to have more and more diverse elements inside them in order to create a deluxe kind of keepsake. It's going to be an interesting time for packaging." ●

