

## Lancaster packaging class brings real-world consumer testing to students



Three potato chip designs made by students for Tom Newmaster's packaging design class at the Pennsylvania College of Art and Design. The designs were put through similar customer testing paces that real brand packaging would be.

Students taking Tom Newmaster's package design class at the Pennsylvania College of Art and Design (PCAD) this semester will be tasked with designing a mockup package design for a brand of their choice and taking that design through actual consumer testing.

Newmaster, a founding partner of Lancaster-based design and branding agency FORCEpkg and a packaging design expert with over 25 years of experience in the industry, has taught at the private art college in Lancaster for 11 years.

One of his newest additions to the class involves having his students take a design of their making through real-world consumer testing.

Newmaster's students choose a brand from a list of categories and then look to improve upon that brand's packaging using a full report on how that brand did in its market.

The designs the students come up with will then be submitted for testing where thousands of consumers will give feedback on the designs. The students can then use that feedback to update their work and turn in a final product.

"I have never heard of anyone else doing this. Taking major market research data and allowing students to use that to redesign (their projects)," he said. "Since they are young designers that haven't seen this before it will probably be a unique challenge for them."

Testing of that caliber can cost a company tens of thousands of dollars but was provided to the class for free by Chicago-based marketing consultant Designalytics.

Newmaster previously worked with Designalytics to test new packaging concepts as part of FORCEpkg. DESIGNalytics' consumer testing involves a survey with a series of questions each related to a different industry.

"The value of their research tool is that a consumer isn't answering 20 questions on a specific product or brand," said Newmaster. "A consumer is asked one question on each category. They are just all pure instant response questions."

Those responses will then be given to the students in order for them to take a second look at their project and make changes, something that a majority of students do not get a chance to do while still in school.

"If any of them apply somewhere with consumer products and that company does any market testing or data, that will be really impressive," he said. "I don't think someone looking to hire a young designer or marketing person will expect that."

Even the largest brands struggle with subjectivity in design, often choosing their own personal opinion over consumer feedback, said Steve Lamoureux, CEO and founder of Designalytics.

“It’s essential for the next generation of designers to appreciate, in a very tangible way, that their opinions will sometimes differ from those of their target audiences,” said Lamoureaux. “Designers tend to shy away from data, so we wanted to give these students an opportunity to learn just how valuable data can be for effective design, and how to use it most strategically.”

Newmaster has offered a version of this project for years but last semester was the first time he brought in real consumer data through the partnership with Designalytics. Previously, the project was based around students designing their own potato chip packaging with a brand that they created.

Newmaster shifted the project to have students pick from a list of different consumer package categories because improving a leading brand may look better on a resume. It also works better with Designalytics’ survey method since the surveys are built to ask one question per industry.

“(Designalytics) would need to run eight to ten surveys to get the results they need,” said Newmaster. “Now they can do it in one theoretically.”

When Newmaster initially signed on to teach some of the college’s packaging design classes, he viewed it as a way to stay fresh on art and design principles as he leaned more into the business end of FORCEpkg. Today, his experience as a teacher has opened doors he didn’t expect it to and a majority of his employees are PCAD alumni.

“It shines positively on your business. There’s an aspect of giving back and sharing with the next generation,” he said. “The loss of your time in the business because you’re teaching a class is overshadowed by the positive impact.”

Newmaster’s project is unique in how it combines business strategies into the classroom but PCAD has been committed to fighting the misconception of the starving artist by creating relationships with area businesses, said Michael Molla, president of PCAD.

“(That real world experience) is incredibly important and today we are starting to see the real data of how artists and designers are working in art and design,” Molla said. “Artists and designers are the ones coming up with solutions for all kinds of challenges. Not just art projects.”



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