

# Revolutionizing Retail Branding.

Article by Perry Seelert Partner, united\* - 2009

## Revolutionizing Retail Branding

There is an excitement in the air about retail brands and reinventing “private label”, and there is lots of speculation about whether or not the economy will create a permanent shift in consumer behavior.

I, for one, think our current behavior is a temporary phenomenon. Very quickly our memories will be erased and even cyclical demand in many categories (for instance, car sales), will overwhelm our so called “passion for thrift” and suppressions of the moment.

We are creatures of our current means and current culture, and the media is even a more Pavlovian driver than ever, so having just experienced the greatest recession in 80 years, now look out for the greatest bounce back.

And what would this mean for retail brands, or private label if you will? It will mean that most retailers have missed their biggest strategic branding opportunity of a lifetime.

That is because most retailers have created a “new” private label with only a slightly better aesthetic mask, better only by virtue of the previous visual faces being so hideous. Brands that are still tactical, price positioned first, and devoid of emotional purpose. Equally at ill, most of this “new” private label hasn’t taken into consideration how it fits within the retailer’s overarching equity.

## An unexpected revolutionary

I do think there are some select retailers whose more emotional, strategically considered retail brands will take preference even when the economy starts to recover, and one of them that is successfully breaking the mold is A&P.

It is ironic that A&P, the first national supermarket chain in the U.S., a \$1 Billion retailer in the 1930’s and the first to launch their own brands in 1880, is again redefining the industry up with powerful new retail brands.

But maybe the first lesson in all of this is that successful retail brands cannot come purely from an opportunistic moment. They must be directed right from top management and they must be a strategic, rightful part of a retailer’s overall direction. In the case of A&P, their own brands are one critical aspect of a related, more overarching strategy of refreshing A&P as a whole, or more crudely put, changing the impression of your grandma’s A&P.



AUTHENTIC ITALIAN PRODUCTS  
OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY, STANDARD  
AND PROCUREMENT

# VIA ROMA™



## The story of Via Roma

I could give you the functional story behind Via Roma, and if it were like most retailers, this is where the story would end.

Boring, tactical and procurement-focused!

This is the beauty of the new A&P though. They remember the perilous times they went through in the 70's and 80's, flirting with extinction, but sometimes a near death experience can be rejuvenating, and it has allowed their management to be bolder.

Via Roma, functionally, was about creating an authentic Italian product line for a retailer that has key hubs in New York and Philadelphia, where there is truly a love of Italian food.

Via Roma, emotionally, creates an immediate visceral response that is palpable and unmistakable. Underlying all of it is a style of portrait photography that isn't afraid to show off people's real personality. It's the complete opposite of the P&G "fake family" depiction that you have seen a thousand times. You know what I am talking about, the family that no one aspires to be like, with artificial hand-holding and smiling.

To be real, we knew we couldn't achieve the emotional authenticity we were looking for from a local casting call, actors or even stock images. So we took our photo shoot to Tuscany, to the village of Lucignano, where we got the entire community deeply involved, even caring about the brand outcomes.

We commissioned a partner in this mission, Bill Hueberger (photographer), and together captured over 80 different people who are the central focus of Via Roma, and demonstrate an expressiveness and truth that simply wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

You should be keeling over right about now, because when have you ever heard about a retailer commissioning this kind of photo shoot? A bold commitment to say the least!

Via Roma is a brand that has true personality and typifies Italian culture and a way of living. It is about joy, love, sharing. It is about the togetherness and special connectedness around the dinner table. And you will also note that the brand intentionally captures an older generation. The idea behind this was that there are certain aspects of life that are timeless, and certain passions that never get too old, like sharing an ice cream together or laughing with friends. And yes, there are recipes that are time-honored as well, and get handed down generation to generation.



The beauty of Via Roma is that the people will become the brand, and across the environmental and out-of-store media, their expressiveness is the cue into brand, rather than a functional description of the product itself.

This rich palette of personalities, where no portrait is the same, creates an interesting, visually impactful trail throughout the store, in a sea of 30,000+ skus where all brands fight for our attention. It is completely different from any other traditional private label, and really isn't private label. Via Roma is a true brand, one that was conceived, by the way, by defying some of the qualitative research (there was another version tested with more typical Italian colors/cues that was seen by consumers as more recognizably Italian). A&P had a lot of guts and vision in supporting the Via Roma brand, and it will undoubtedly pay off.





GREEN WAY™

### There's their way, and then there's Green Way

The courage didn't stop with Via Roma though, and A&P has also recently launched a new eco-organic brand called Green Way. Now admittedly, A&P has been about the last to the party in launching a natural/organic brand within their own brand range.

The key has been not to imitate. Retailer brands always are so fond of mimicking. Visual and strategic mimes. A&P was already determined to do something different and ownable, but they wanted again for it to make sense with what they are trying to do within the new A&P. So, there are five aspects to Green Way that will be unique markers within the brand.

#### New brand umbrella:

The first thing that is different about Green Way is how Doug Palmer, VP Own Brands at A&P, conceived of the brand. Where most retailers are creating very distinct, narrowly defined brands for "organic", "natural" and "ecological" segments, Doug saw that there where was more power in creating an umbrella that expressed all of these three segment concepts within the brand. His thinking was that these segments represented close affinities that would be better understood and branded together for the A&P consumer.

#### Simplification:

The second idea that we felt was important to incorporate within Green Way was an overriding simplification.

Especially the simplification of language where most people (especially the A&P consumer) didn't understand the verbal nuances between "fluorocarbons", "biodiversity" & "geobiofuels". This is the Whole Foods consumer who gets this. A&P did not want to intimidate their consumers and even employees, so there is a conscious and continuing effort to explain the Green Way brand initiative in straightforward terms.

#### Visual language:

The language and styling of Green Way strives to do the exact opposite of most organic brands, where there is the stereotypical farm, dirty fingernails and exaggerated oneness with the earth. There is also an apologetic language that exists today, asking you to buy on principle rather than buy organic because of its natural beauty. We strove to change that, matching the verbal simplicity with a clean, minimal approach showing the innate beauty of the ingredient. Refreshing hints of color, with a clarity that has real power versus other mass market brands on shelf.



**Transparency:**

The fourth concept within the brand that is different is an upfront honesty that we are creating in the communication, internally and externally. This is important because it shows that A&P is not perfect, they are not Whole Foods, but that the chain is openly expressing its progress in the journey of becoming more organic and ecologically friendly. There is a transparency in the nutritional characteristics, bringing what's typically on the back of the pack to the front of the pack.

**Voice beyond the package:**

The fifth calling of the brand will be the marketing beyond the package, to the store environment, web and outside the store. A lightheartedness versus a seriousness will rule the day here (since there has been enough guilt-loaded moralizing to other brands), and by taking the edge off it will actually front-load the brand with more honesty.

All of these five factors help to differentiate the Green Way brand, distancing it again from the typical private label. Time will tell as it always does in branding, but strategically we are starting from a different place.



greenway, the choice for those of us who believe in life without layers. truly simple & clean in our total approach, this translates to what we eat, how we think, and the connection we have with mother earth.





## Excitement in the air

While the economy is still frightening for many, and looking at the daily stock price within corporations is a reality, we are convinced that creating ownable, differentiated brands for A&P will be a key part of their continued revitalization.

These brands are part of defining a new voice for A&P, and they ultimately break the typical mold of retailer created private label. It requires a certain vision and determination not to just aesthetically concoct a brand, but to ground it in strategy that is differentiated, yet makes sense within the retailer's overall mission.

All private label is doing well in this environment, and sadly, this will all turn ugly the moment the economy starts to come back. A recession doesn't instill permanent consumer virtues, and the difference with A&P is that they will have a set of brands that won't have to worry about this resurgence. Will you?

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