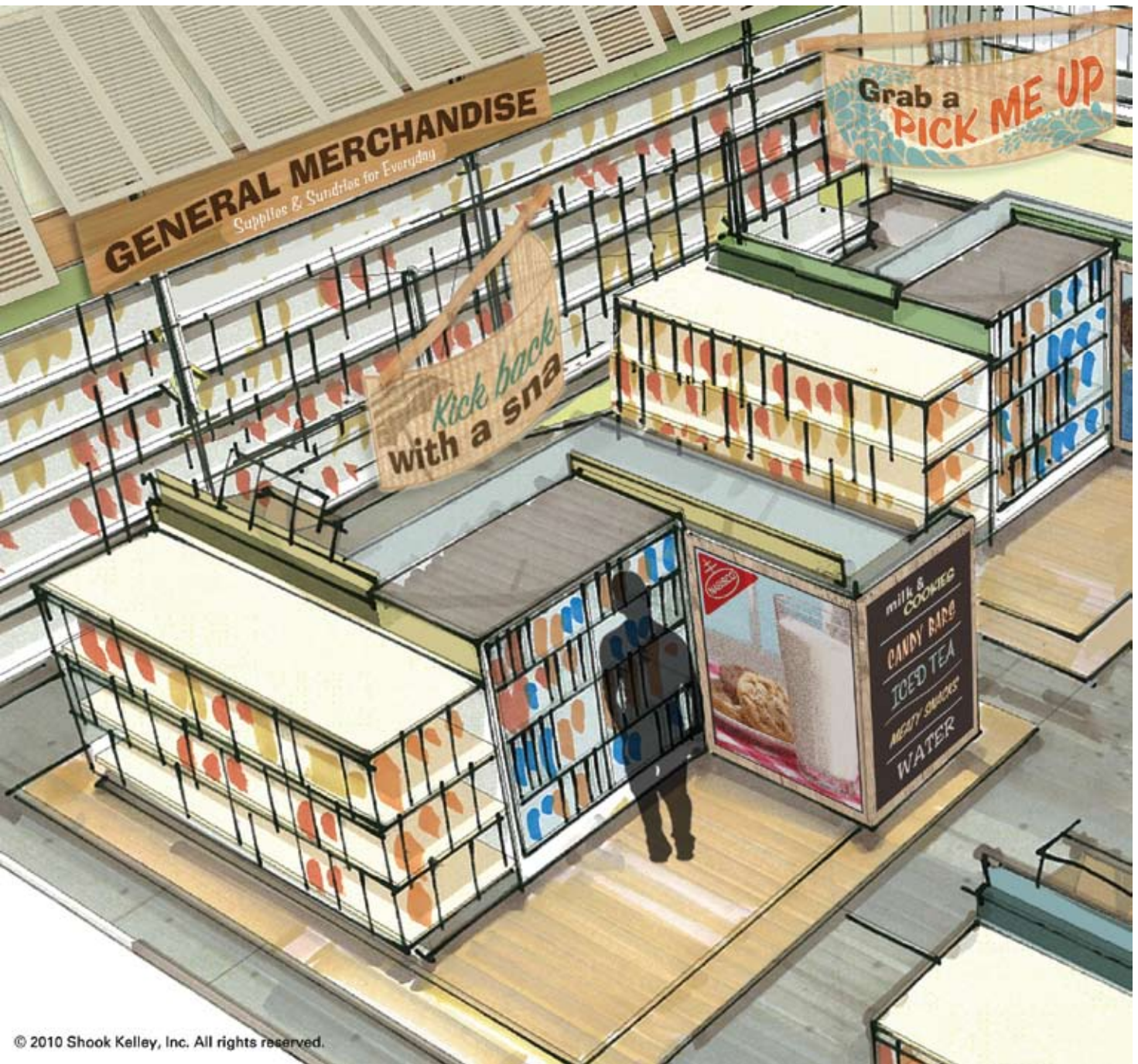


THE FEAST AND THE FURIOUS

A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST'S TAKE ON THE RITUALS, HABITS
AND TRIBAL LIFE OF CONVENIENCE STORE CUSTOMERS.
BY MICHAEL G. POWELL

AS A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, I have up-close and personally learned about my discipline's great tradition by studying tribes and tribal wisdom from around the world. Anthropology has explored social relationships that have existed since the dawn of civilization. And while a lot of our jargon can get pretty obscure, I see many of the same tribal patterns in our culture today — from the cult-like following of Apple fanatics to the great sports fan rivalries.

But it wasn't until I began working on a research and design innovation project in convenience stores that I began to look more closely at another curious sub-section of consumer culture and a truly exotic tribe known affectionately as "the fast and the furious."



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Many of you are aware of this phrase from the popular *Fast & the Furious* movie franchise. And you may have also figured out that the same folks who watch these movies also frequent convenience stores for gas, energy drinks, snacks and maybe even a pair of fuzzy dice, too. Beyond entertainment value, these films tell the story of a modern tribe that values mobility, thrives on a fast pace and worships a car-centric lifestyle.

And those qualities are not limited to

young, action-seeking males, but to others comprising the convenience store audience — everyone from working grandmothers to professional sales people, construction guys to high school students, house painter crews to even the occasional professional loiterer, and many others.

“The fast and the furious” speaks to a larger-scale insight about the convenience store experience, the relationship between the store and its con-

sumers and ultimately, the industry’s greater potential.

GETTING STARTED

For 12 months a diverse team of retail and consumer behavior experts from Shook Kelley — self-described as an “atypical design firm with a focus on leveraging consumer perceptions” — lived, as they say, “like the natives” and hung out in convenience stores. While the majority of our time was spent observing con-

TO GET “CONVENIENT TRUTHS”

Cadbury

Recognizing a greater potential for the convenience store industry, Cadbury contacted Shook Kelley to further explore the industry’s possibilities. Based on a wide set of research insights, this project informed ideas from our design team — including architects, graphic designers and interior designers — that are leading to innovative new approaches to the convenience store.

But like any design problem, there’s no single or one-size-fits-all solution for every convenience store. That is why we pushed ourselves to develop a range of possibilities for the industry, from total store redesigns to more modular concepts.

We hope that you will take the opportunity to talk further with Cadbury to gain more insights on the thinking that went into these renderings, as well as learning about the full spectrum of design solutions Shook Kelley has been working on.

For more information about “Convenient Truths,” contact Andrew Capron at andrew.capron@cadbury.com or Dave Fleischer at dave.fleischer@cadbury.com.

sumers, we also talked informally with consumers, interviewed industry executives and studied the industry at large.

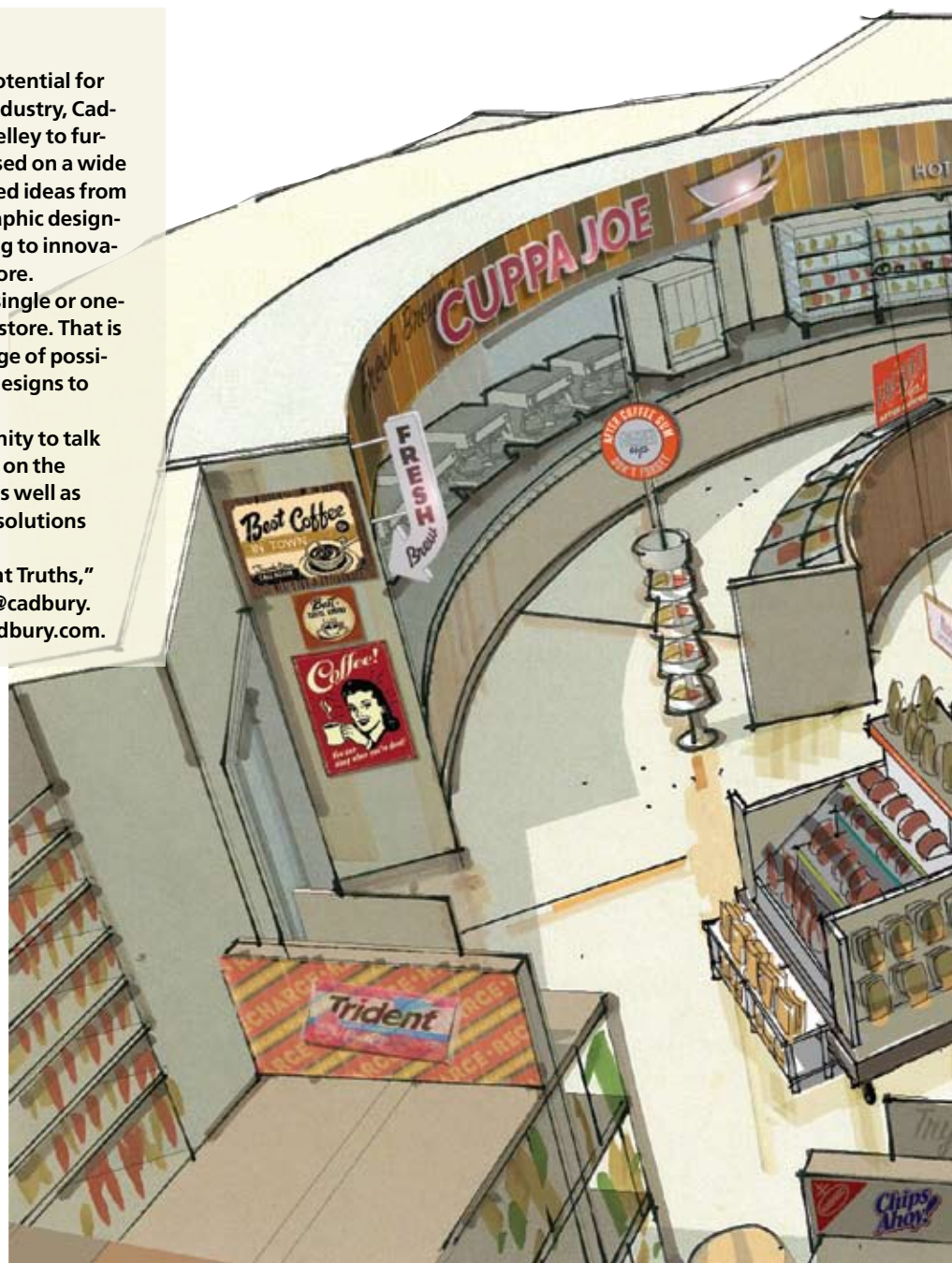
The project, “Convenient Truths,” was conducted in collaboration with Cadbury North America, which commissioned, funded and guided the study. Although a gum and candy company, Cadbury specifically directed us to *not* restrict the project to consumer buying habits of confections, but to expand the scope of our study to include an entire collection of rituals, habits, behaviors and perceptions consumers experience in convenience stores.

The primary goals of the project:

- Gather insights on how the convenience store environment is perceived and shapes behavior.
- Develop store design strategies and techniques to enhance the consumer’s shopping experience.
- Discover ways to increase the quantity of shopping occasions, dwell times and basket sizes.

Going beyond traditional survey research, we sought to break down the consumer experience into three dimensions:

1. The **physical** level includes the physical layout of the store, from the pathways consumers take to the visual communications they see.



2. The **emotional** level looks at consumers’ mindsets and the way they feel in the space.
3. The **social** level considers the shared meanings and rituals, as well as the actual social interactions inside of the store.

In describing “the fast and the furious,” the emotional dimension of the convenience store experience takes precedence. Complete physical and social insights, as well as design solutions for all three sets of problems, are included in the “Convenient Truths” study.

THE FAST

For 17 years, Shook Kelley has studied the habits of consumers in a variety of places — grocery stores, shopping centers, restaurants, even universities. And while convenience stores share some similarities with other foodservice retailers, the plainest difference is the incredibly fast pace of c-store consumers.

For anyone in the industry, this finding is obvious. Both industry experts and store clerks explained that convenience store consumers are *always* in a



Are consumers really in such a hurry? Or, are convenience stores prompting consumers to act like they should be in a hurry?

tank and get out — the quicker the better. Pit stops are not places where people think, engage or consider possibilities. The pit stop mentality is all about knowing what you want before you arrive.

And at the pit stop, it's preferable to leave the ignition on — perhaps why we saw so many consumers holding their car keys in their hands while shopping convenience stores. Consumers, in essence, are signaling to themselves and communicating to everyone around them that they are still really in a car-driving mindset. Prompted to treat the store as a pit stop, consumers do exactly that.

But while we certainly spotted a lot of consumers who moved through the convenience store quickly, what we didn't always see was a sense of certainty or clarity when it came to knowing exactly what they needed from the store.

Body language suggested that consumers were actually unsure of exactly what they needed. We spotted wandering eyes, hesitant pauses and puzzled head checks that indicated a degree of questioning and curiosity. (As a general rule, body language is far more telling than verbal communication inside stores.)

Granted, this was not the degree of curiosity that we often see among consumers in grocery stores, fashion retail or shopping malls, but it was nonetheless an indication that consumers were not as inclined to embrace a "pit stop" mentality as industry wisdom would suggest. In other words, we believe there is more to the consumer's purchase potential than what's currently leveraged in today's convenience stores.

For our team, this raised a very critical question: Are consumers really in such a hurry? Or, are convenience stores prompting consumers to act like they should be in a hurry?

THE FURIOUS

Understanding the emotional state of consumers can be a challenging task, oftentimes because human beings in gen-

eral, and men in particular, have trouble putting their feelings into words.

This is even more the case when people are faced with challenging negative emotions — like indignation, unhappiness or frustration — that are often related to life's daily stresses, such as rush hour traffic, arguments at work or home, or just the frustration of trying to find some time to eat a good meal.

What we noticed most often in our observational research was that consumers entered the convenience store with a serious "game face" on, which is really an attempt to cover up their emotional mindset. We interpreted consumers' rapid pace and "game face" appearance as an indication of their "furious" state. And by furious, we mean a combination of emotions that include intensity, determination and briskness.

To complicate matters, we also recognized that convenience store consumers have to insert store trips around relatively brief openings in their daily schedule. This inability to fully plan and control their time, combined with their furiousness, speaks to the emotional baggage consumers bring with them into the store.

But despite these and other emotional insights, the generally accepted industry wisdom we encountered was that convenience store consumers are not very emotional and don't respond well to emotional appeals.

GETTING EMOTIONAL

At times, the industry's perspective on consumer behavior sounded more like an objective description of some alien species rather than the real life story of a group of human beings. But we all know that convenience store consumers are the same people who leave the store and live a real life, heading off to work, school, home or other retail destinations. Emotions are not something these people can turn on and off easily. These emotions are always present, lurking in every life situation and environment.

Because consumers are not typically considered emotionally connected to their stores, their shopping trips or the products they purchase, it makes sense that most convenience stores are accordingly designed as functional, clean and straightforward places. The net effect of this, however, is often a store that's bland, story-less and uninspiring.

We studied recently redesigned store brands that did try to include a more emotional tone of voice, and we commonly saw the use of colors, imagery and

places. Take, for instance, how Harley-Davidson leveraged mid-life crisis males' deeply complex emotional mindsets to put them into a more inspirational — and aspirational — place. And a number of young adult brands, from AXE body spray to ESPN, Jack In The Box to Mountain Dew, are leveraging irreverent humor and satire to communicate with consumers who may have a more cynical view of their world.

To put it lightly, these types of consumers don't respond well to harmony

ARE CONVENIENCE STORES TRULY UN-EMOTIONAL SPACES — OR ARE THEY SIMPLY MISSING THE EMOTIONAL MARK?

text that spoke in either a “fun” voice for kids or a “feminine” voice for women. Many of the new store design elements tried to create a message that communicated harmony, comfort and joy.

But while we understand the desire to reach newer audiences through store decor packages, many convenience stores still miss the opportunity to communicate more strongly with their core audience: the fast and the furious.

By trying to make these fast and furious consumers feel more childlike, feminine or harmonious, these approaches don't embrace the emotional reality of what hardworking men and women who stop by the convenience store have to deal with on an everyday basis. Their furious mindset is a kind of emotional baggage that they carry into the store from somewhere else in their lives.

At the same time, we noticed that store environments aren't really leveraging this emotional mindset — but a store design strategy should have a clear position on what to do here.

Many other retail environments and brands have already figured out ways to break down the “game face” and speak to audiences in challenging emotional

and joy. But they do relate to messages that poke fun at the way society works and may even try to undermine authority.

These insights raised, for us, a critical question of whether convenience stores are truly un-emotional spaces — or are they simply missing the emotional mark?

THE GREATER POTENTIAL

If there's one major insight cultural anthropology has to teach us, it's this: Studying different cultures can show us that our own way of doing things isn't necessarily natural or inevitable.

This same rule applies to the way that businesses get caught up into routine ways of looking at their consumers.

Just as every culture owns a legacy of traditional wisdom, every industry owns a legacy of conventional wisdom — and for the most part, this wisdom serves them well. But when conventional wisdom becomes simply the minimum standard by which businesses operate, they can begin to miss out on a greater potential. **NACS**

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