

Design is crossing the gender line with increasing boldness.

Which products are leading the charge?

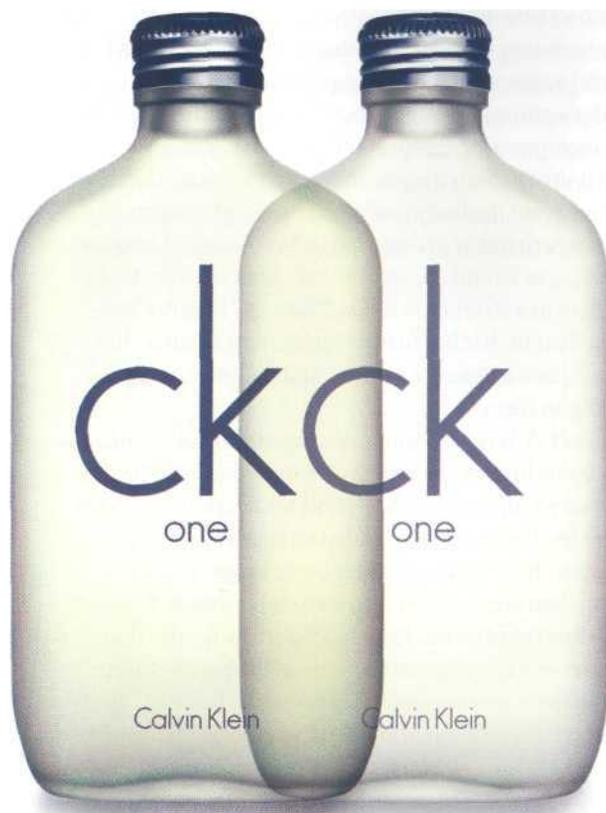
Unisex Sells

BY GREG LINDSAY

WHEN SAMSUNG INTRODUCED its SGH-530 mobile phone in Europe last year, the women for whom it was designed hadn't asked for a petal-pink shell, much less a calorie counter, fragrance coordinator, height and weight charts, and menstrual-cycle calendar. Like most manufacturers, Samsung was grappling with what could be called the "pink problem": For years, splashing products with pink was a quick fix for feminizing just about anything, but the color has become too obvious, too pandering. Besides, pink's not just for women anymore. Think pink Oxford shirts on former fraternity brothers, or the pink T-shirt made famous by rapper Cam'ron.

What, then, becomes the best way to capture larger portions of the market without resorting to stereotypes? Companies looking for a bigger market share are being challenged not only to adapt generic products to specific consumers, but conversely to steer wares—and colors—that traditionally skew either masculine or feminine toward an elegant compromise.

When corporate marketing departments are ready to rip off their rose-colored glasses, they should study the items featured on the following pages. All were designed or branded to breach the gender divide, and only one of them comes in pink.



Cosmetics and Fragrance

Here's the fragrance industry's dirty little secret: Every scent, when it's born in the lab, is potentially androgynous. "A fragrance is a fragrance, period. The rest is all in the marketing," says Fabien Baron, who designed the frosted glass bottle for CK One, Calvin Klein's recently re-launched unisex scent that defined the heroin-chic androgyny of the mid-'90s. As fragrances go, CK One was nothing special—a top-note-heavy citrus that signaled neither androgyny nor youth to other perfumers. "I think they picked those notes because they weren't associated with anything," says Chandler Burr, author of *The Emperor of Scent*. "CK One is not a gendered scent, it's an American scent. It smells clean and fresh and those are quintessentially American qualities."

CK One's enormous success—it broke all fragrance sales records when it was introduced in 1994, moving \$5 million worth of flasks in its first 10 days on the market—mostly

stemmed from an ingenious combination of branding and packaging. The sexually charged black-and-white ad campaign, which depicted waifish models wearing jeans and little else, spoke to teens in search of an edge. The unassuming bottle design had equally universal appeal—recyclable cardboard packaging nodded to au courant environmentalism while a screw top was meant to evoke a two-liter bottle of Coke. "I wanted the bottle to be common, easy to understand, familiar," Baron says.

CK One's outre sex appeal sets it apart from the clinical attributes of most other androgynous scents and skin-care products. Biologique Recherche's P50 unisex moisturizer established a more familiar model: a scientifically superior product packaged in a plain white bottle. Created by the biologist Yvan Allouche, P50 is full of so many herbal extracts and acids that it smells positively medicinal, but the odor suggests it *works*. It's strong enough for a man, even if its traditional customer is a woman. (Which explains why P50 is so popular in the U.S.—blame the metrosexual for its sold-out run here this winter.)

Malin + Goetz, the self-proclaimed "modern apothecary," peddles unisex hair and skincare products in minimalist packaging designed by the New York firm 2x4. Simple color gradients and typographic weights vary to distinguish different items in the line. Again, the intention was to be clinical, "so there's a certain severity in the packaging," says co-founder Andrew Goetz.

The company takes androgyny a step farther with fragrance pairs that are not only unisex but designed to be worn by couples in tandem. The first pair is lime and musk; the second, which Malin + Goetz began selling in March, is lotus root and rum. Because the fragrances were engineered to perform best when blended, men and women (or men and men, in some cases) can now aim to not just look good together, but smell good together, too.

Performance

In 1996, Burton issued a signature line for its first wave of sponsored women snowboarders. Until then, the company had produced only unisex boards, relying on height and weight ratios alone to determine a proper fit. That approach hit a sore spot with customers. Often, teenage boys and women in their twenties were steered toward the same purchases—even though the boards were designed to accommodate larger male boot sizes—leaving women at a disadvantage in terms of balance and control.

For its women's line, Burton fixed the flaw and feminized the graphics. "Women who want to try snowboarding now only want to see women's boards, which blows us away," says Scott Barbieri, business unit director and former R&D chief for Burton's snowboard division. And yet the gender bending continues: Burton's most popular board among men and women is currently Olympic gold medalist Shaun White's signature model. Because of White's unusually small feet—he wears a men's 8—women can also use it comfortably,

although its depictions of growling arctic monsters make the board "about as male as you can get," Barbieri says.

Burton's case demonstrates that compensating for female physiology without resorting to stereotypes calls for thoughtful approaches in both engineering and marketing gender-appropriate products. RKS Design addressed this issue by incorporating lightweight models into its award-winning line of patented open-architecture guitars that allow users to swap out the body's colored panels. Yes, pink is an option, but each guitar arrives clad in basic black. "I have two daughters, ages 16 and 21, and the last thing we want to do is treat them in a stereotypical way," says RKS founder Ravi Sawhney. "Part of that has to do with creating a guitar that isn't grossly overweight for women, and part of it is not condescending to them."

Wilson's W Series of women's racquets makes use of a proprietary technology as well: Its "nCode" process of inserting nano-sized silicon dioxide crystals within the frame's carbon fibers lends each racquet added strength and stability. The W Series also features a lighter body, longer head, and softer grip than are found in conventional racquets. But even Wilson's director of technology, Bill Severa, concedes that the W Series was less engineering-driven than style-driven. The new shape is more organic and there's a choice of nine color-and-pattern combinations with you-go-girl names like Savage Lime and Cobalt Storm. Still, Severa points out, "it's not like a man couldn't play with them."



Consumer Electronics

Samsung, for its part, now knows not to use ovulation as a selling point. In March, the company released the Z5 portable MP3 player, which is framed as an iPod Nano-killer. The Z5 resembles its nemesis in both technical specs and price but trades black and white for brushed metal. Samsung claims it didn't have women specifically in mind when imagining its ideal customer—neutered composites like the "premium seeker" are the preferred characters in the land of company jargon. The design was meant to appeal equally to both sexes, representatives say. But the tagline—"a touch of metal"—

did spark debate in-house as to whether the phrase was too explicitly aimed at style-obsessed women; after all, says the company's marketing manager, Matt Durgin, "it may be rapidly evolving, but you still see a male skew in the portable music category."

Motorola's design team uses a similar vernacular, tailoring products to customers' differing "mindsets" rather than playing to specific genders, says Jim Wicks, director of consumer experience design. But Wicks acknowledges that the "mindset" that prefers the new Pebl phone's curves to the Razr's sharp lines is more often female than male.

For the Pebl, tactility was a major consideration from the start. "We were going for something that has more in common with what our customers might already have in their bags, like sunglasses or other accessories," says Wicks. "It's the kind of device that when you pick it up, it grows on you. And that notion tends to appeal to women."



Housewares

Kitchens, bedrooms, and baths are traditionally considered a woman's domain, but as more and more men contribute to the design of these rooms, they find themselves marginalized by housewares companies that presume the primary consumer is female. That's where Ravi Sawhney comes in once again: In 2004, Zyliss hired his firm to create garlic presses, cheese graters, and potato slicers for neglected bachelors—or at least that's how Sawhney interpreted the brief. When Patrice Gerber, director of worldwide product development at Zyliss USA, talks about a mix of "looks, features, and functionality," he's clearly referring not to the cheese grater's matte plastic finish so much as its innovative rotating drum. It's meant for a user who digs the engineering beneath the surface—in other words, men.

Engineering isn't the only way to attract male consumers, however, as color, textile, and materials consultant Laura Guido-Clark found when Design Within Reach invited her to collaborate on its first line of male-appropriate bed-

ding. In considering a coverlet-to-boxspring rethink of the bed, Guido-Clark and DWR's design team resolved to banish patterns beyond simple geometries. "The more patterned you get, the more men become alienated," she explains. "Historically, I think that has to do with how men have adorned themselves, using patterns only sparingly." The new bedding, she adds, also appeals to women.

At the other end of the gender divide, stainless-steel-maker Julien approached kitchen design specialist Troy Adams to "feminize steel" by integrating it into the bathroom in a way that wouldn't strike women as clinical. Despite the success of stainless steel in the kitchen, Adams explains, women found it too cold in the intimate confines of the bathroom. For Julien, Adams paired the steel with teak and smooth stones to evoke a spa-like, Asian ambience. The metal is visually neutral, he believes. "It doesn't have a hard color nor is it bland. It was simply a matter of warming it up a bit."





Color

"Women have always been more open to color in consumer products than men," says Leatrice Eiseman, director of the Pantone Color Institute. "The trend toward androgyny in color signals that the female openness has spread to men, who now get it." Getting it, in Eiseman's view, means moving beyond a narrow palette of navy, gray, brown, black, and white. Purple, for example, is gaining traction after percolating in the world of action sports for more than a decade, and is infiltrating everything from men's activewear to that most MacGyver-esque of tools, the multifunctional Leatherman.

And then there's pink. Since its success on the men's runway, pink has trickled down to other previously forbidden areas—even cell phones. "People forget that pink was big at the end of 2005 across both genders," says Motorola's Jim Wicks, defending his own work. "A large proportion of women bought our pink phones, but there were a decent number of men in our office carrying around pink Razrs, just to stand out."

Women, meanwhile, are busy reclaiming brown, "the ultimate male color, the color of leather, of very expensive things," Eiseman says. Chocolate brown has proved wildly popular in skincare and cosmetics lines such as Origins and Bath & Bodyworks' cocoa-infused creams and Estee Lauder's soon-to-be-introduced cocoa-dusted lipsticks. But the female taste for the dark stuff has never existed on a purely aesthetic level to the extent it does now. The mania for chocolate has even meant a boom for florists, such as Washington's Chocolate Flower Farm, which specialize in brown species of sunflowers and other perennials. The same trend is driving West Elm's Espresso line of furniture and accessories.

With men and women both loving color, what, then, does Eiseman make of the iPod's imperturbably glossy whites? "They're transgender," she sighs. As if we needed proof.

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