

Pop artist

Linda Tischler

Meet the man with a nearly uncontainable design challenge: making Coke even bigger (and staying ahead of Pepsi).

The image on the Webcam is grainy but unmistakable: a blond woman, likely in her thirties, steps up to a shiny silver soda-fountain machine at a fast-food restaurant in Atlanta and plants a fat kiss on its side. The moment is unscripted and, as far as the woman knows, unwitnessed by anyone except a girl who appears to be her daughter, busily filling her cup. If great design is all about creating a bond between your product and your customer, this is clearly some kind of mechanized Cyrano de Bergerac, brokering the ardor between a consumer and her Diet Cherry Coke.

The reason for this public display of affection? It might be the fountain's astounding array of choices, more than 100 different Coca-Cola variants, including exotic hybrids such as Minute Maid Raspberry Lemonade, Caffeine-Free Diet Coke With Lime, Orange Coke, and Fanta Peach. Or it could be the machine's intuitive, glowing screen, with its playful interface. Or the appeal might be more primal, what the Pietmontese call geddu: Its studly curves and elegant grillwork were sculpted by designers at Pininfarina, stylists of the Ferrari, Maserati, and Alfa Romeo.

Hot or not, the new Freestyle fountain, originally code-named Project Jet, has been a top-secret priority at Coca-Cola for the past four years. In alpha testing this summer (hence the hidden Webcam), it finally goes public this fall, rolling out to various Subway, Jack in the Box, and Burger King restaurants on the West Coast. It's an audacious move for Coke, representing the largest investment in equipment innovation in the company's history--hundreds of millions of dollars--and a big bet by CEO Muhtar Kent. Kent, a Formula One fan, not only approved the project but also urged the team to make the machine look "like a Ferrari."

But Freestyle's success--or failure--will ultimately be a referendum on David Butler, the company's vice president of global design, who masterminded its development. Butler, along with industrial design chief Vince Voron (recruited by Butler four years ago from Apple as the point man for the machine's design), built Freestyle to address a host of business conundrums: how to satisfy a consumer base that has been increasingly moving away from carbonated sodas; how to lighten the carbon footprint generated by hauling millions of gallons of syrup around the world; how to offer maximum variety within the cramped confines of a fast-food restaurant or cafeteria; and how to get accurate, real-time feedback on customer choices.

That's a lot to ask of one machine, but it's just the kind of challenge that rings Butler's chimes. "I love big, giant, enormous systems, no matter what they are," he says.

Being a systems geek would seem to be a prerequisite for design success at a place like Coke. "The reality of the business is that it's a flow of material and energy on a massive scale," says. Bruce Mau, a guy who, as founder of the international design project Massive Change, understands what "massive" really means. Mau helped Coke design a major sustainability initiative. "Our whole project was systems," he says. "In fact, that's how they refer to the company--as a system."

If Butler likes his systems big, he has "come to the right place. With 450 brands operating in 200 countries, and 20,000 retailers selling 1.6 billion servings of Coke products per day--that's 18,000 servings per second--it would be hard to find a bigger canvas on which to explore design as an enterprise function. Butler oversees a team of 50 designers within Coke and works with some 300 agencies worldwide. In a company as colossal as this one, no single

designer can pretend to control every permutation of every product in every far-flung fast-food joint. Instead, Butler's job has been to build a central design apparatus that is at once specific and flexible, one that can roll out across the globe without losing focus--or customers. And that's exactly what he's done, from the brand identity at the center of Coke's corporate id to the advertising machine that projects that identity around the world to the very machines that dispense the company's myriad products into your cup.

"If you distill it down, it's this," Butler says. "Big giant brands. Big scale. And how to create value through design."

Tall and soft-spoken, Butler is holding forth from the cozy confines of a conference room at the World of Coca-Cola, the three-story, \$15 million shrine to the world's best-selling soft drink; outside, a spectacular thunderstorm roils the Atlanta skies. Wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Coke messaging in Thai, longish sideburns, and hair just shaggy enough to signal that he's not one of the suits, the native Floridian could pass for the bassist in an indie band or a surf-shop owner in Cocoa Beach. Butler, 43, is ambitious but self-effacing, passionate but strategic, relentless but patient as a monk.

"He's an old soul," says Keith Yamashita, cofounder of Stone Yamashita, who has worked as a management consultant to the company for four years. "Most people are attracted to Coke because of ego," Yamashita says. "You need that to think you can Change a billion-dollar brand. David is the opposite. He doesn't feel like he has to grandstand or dominate you, because it's not about him; it's about success."

But Butler isn't at Coke to change a billion-dollar brand--he's there to reconceive the design of 13 billion-dollar brands. Since he arrived in 2004, he has torn down and rebuilt the design strategy at every level of the company. And he has managed this epic list of projects with a low-key but extraordinarily effective strategy: Avoid using the word "design" at all costs.

"It's great that when David speaks, he doesn't speak in the language of design," says Joe Tripodi, Coca-Cola's global marketing chief. When he talks to folks on the manufacturing side, to the bottlers, to the retailers, Butler's message, Tripodi says, "is very simple: Here's what I'm going to do to help you sell more stuff."

Contrast that with his counterpart, Pepsi's design consultant, Peter Arnell, who titillated the blogosphere last spring with a 27-page memo he wrote called "Breathtaking," defending his new logo design. He cited inspiration from da Vinci's Mona Lisa to his Vitruvian Man, and described the "gravitational pull" of a can of Pepsi On a supermarket shelf. That was before he compared his genius at creating a 3-D Super Bowl ad to Thomas Edison's invention of motion pictures. Many designers were mortified, fearing Arnell had discredited the whole tribe with his claptrap.

In many ways, Butler is the anti-Arnell, a first-class designer who shuns the latest trendspeak. "I read all the journals. I love design theory. I'm a junkie for that stuff. But that's at home," he says. "At work, I don't use the phrase 'design thinking.' Here, it's about creating more value. How do we sell more of something? How do we improve the experience to make more money and create a sustainable planet?"

Selling "more stuff" has proven to be a pretty effective strategy, even in a downturn. Case volume was up 4% for the second quarter and profits were better than expected, based on strong sales in China and India. And in 2008, the Coca-Cola company's market share was 42.7%, compared to PepsiCo's 30.8%, according to Beverage Digest. On the brand level, Coke's share rose to 17.3% from 17.2% in the carbonated soft-drink category in 2008, while Pepsi's fell to 10.3% from 10.7% a year earlier.

Nobody's saying these results can be credited solely to Butler. Coke's latest advertising campaign, "Open Happiness," by Wieden+Kennedy, has bumped brand-preference scores globally by 6% versus 2007. And strong performance by Fuze and the recently acquired VitaminWater have boosted sales in the increasingly important noncarbonated-beverage segment. But, as Tripodi notes, "Butler happens to be one of the most visible and biggest facilitators of how we will win in the marketplace."

That's no small tribute, given the volatile and competitive corporate ecosystem in which Butler operates. "There have been three CMOs and three CEOs in David's time," Yamashita says. "Who would have thought that the quietest guy in the room would thrive in a place that's so complex and cutthroat? David is like your best secretary of state. His job is to bring multiple people to the table and set a new high bar. That's what his work did."

Butler's marching orders when he arrived five years ago were simple. So simple, in fact, they fit on a Post-it Note. On his first day at work, his then boss, chief creative officer Esther Lee (now at AT&T), handed him a yellow sticky. It said three things: 1) Meet a lot of new people and get to know the business. 2) Work on Coke. 3) Tell me when you need help.

"I took the job with the attitude that Coke has the largest supply chain on the planet, it has the biggest [manufacturing] System, giant brands, and it's fairly broken from a design perspective," Butler recalls. "Naively, I thought, What can go wrong? This is a great opportunity!"

Coke's business at the time was languishing. Douglas Daft was CEO; by the end of the year, he would be replaced by E. Neville Isdell, who himself would be succeeded, in 2008, by Kent. There were supply-chain problems, trouble with bottlers, lost opportunities in the global markets, dwindling interest in its core products. The CMO chair was like the teacup ride at Disney World. "I came in 2007, and I'm the seventh [marketing] person since 1998!" Tripodi says.

"The churn at the top was shocking," another designer told me. "I have mustard in my fridge that's been around longer than some of those execs."

Making Butler's job even more complicated was the fact that during the previous decade, as the globalization debate heated up, big brands like Coke had struggled to balance maintaining a strong, unified identity with the need for a more decentralized strategy. By allowing local marketers to put their spin on a brand, they hoped to defuse some of the anti-American hostility that had led farmers in France to ransack a McDonald's and protesters to smash Starbucks's windows in Seattle. During Dart's tenure (he left in 2004), he pushed for more local autonomy in peddling Coke products: If bottlers in the Baltics wanted to slap bubbles and homegrown typography on their cans, he said, so be it.

Predictably, perhaps, by 2005 the brand messaging was a mess. Even within the United States, the design language was chaotic: There were multiple variations on the bottle, the color palette was haphazard, the placement of the signature Coke "ribbon" was arbitrary, illustration and photography styles were idiosyncratic. Just the kind of chaos, in other words, that gets Butler excited. In his mind, he saw big, broken systems--and massive opportunity. "When I came," Butler says, "people recognized that they had a business problem. They just didn't know it was a design problem."

Coca-Cola had never had an in-house vice president of design until Butler. In fact, his original title, vice president of visual identity, described a limited sphere of influence. In his first few weeks, folks would routinely show up at his door asking, for help in designing banners for volleyball tournaments and graphics for off-sites, assignments he diplomatically deflected. Six

months in, Butler still wasn't getting much traction. The problem, he realized, was that nobody really understood the word "design." So he had what he describes as his "Jerry Maguire moment." He wrote a three-page manifesto, short and simple, called "Designing on Purpose" and sent it out to everyone he knew in the company.

The idea was to show his colleagues that even though they didn't recognize it as such, Coca-Cola is one of the world's largest design companies. And to point out that a more deliberate focus on design could sell more stuff. "The word 'design' is not so important to the top echelons of the company, but winning at the point of sale is fundamental," Butler says. "I wanted to show how you could create value for the business through design. I had no organization, no influence, nothing to point to, but now we had that statement out there--a flag in the ground."

It worked. "I wasn't trying to create a magic phrase," he says, "but after that, every time I stood up, people would say, 'This is the guy who's about designing on purpose.'"

A big opportunity to demonstrate what that meant soon presented itself. Marc Mathieu, at the time head of Coke global brand marketing, was determined to rein in the brand identity that had run amok the previous years. Under the banner of "revival of an icon," he convened a meeting of 30 people in London for three days, where he walked through his idea. Butler had his first big mission.

His background had teed him up for just such a project. In 1994, six years and several graphic design jobs after graduating from the University of South Florida with a degree in mass communications, Butler took a job with the Atlanta firm Copeland Hirthler, creating the identity standards for the 1996 Atlanta Games. It was his first hairy systems project. The logos and images he created were deployed on everything from T-shirts to collectibles to identity systems for Olympic affiliates. It was a lesson he wouldn't forget: "You have to think big; you have to think scale."

A year after the Games, Butler went to his bosses and suggested the company move into the exciting new-media space growing up alongside the Internet. They were dismissive: It's a fad, they said, simultaneously losing both a potential competitive edge and one of their most promising employees. Butler, a fan of both Marshall McLuhan and Nicholas Negroponte, was enamored of the digital space. "The concept of millions of machines together fascinated me," he says. So he and a partner started a firm called Process 1234 to explore the burgeoning industry. They designed the user interface for CNN.com's first streaming video player.

Butler was hooked. He wanted to go large; his partner wanted to stay small. So he sold his pal the business, and joined Clement Mok's new firm in Atlanta, Studio Archetype. He thrived helping design strategies for companies that wanted to move onto the Web. In 1998, Mok sold his company to Sapient, the new-economy consulting firm, and Butler suddenly had a new employer with supersize clients, including United.com, Delta.com, Gucci.com, and UPS.com.

That experience and a run-in with Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* changed the way Butler thought about design. He saw how systems thinking could be applied in a more holistic way. In the past, he says, design had been focused on straightforward problems: Come up with a drinking vessel, say. But now it was being asked to solve multipronged problems: How do we get clean drinking water? "We're moving from linear problems to wicked problems," he says, and the old default solution--hire a rock-star designer--no longer works. "The model of a master of design creating that magical object that is going to change the business is an old way of thinking. I can't use it to work on wicked problems. I need to have capability internally."

Then Coke called. Butler had a few other offers on the table, but his mentor, Mok, told him to go for it: "If design is really going to make an impact on business, the only way it can happen is to have people inside, designing from the inside out."

Stashed behind an unmarked green door, down a long, gray hall of green doors, in the basement of Coke's North American headquarters, is the vast Coca-Cola archive. Inside are several hundred thousand artifacts accumulated over the company's 123-year history, from the world's first six-pack to hip-hopper Cee-Lo Green's giant zebra coat from the "Open Happiness" video.

Butler began his odyssey here, among some of the touchstones of American design: the original contour bottles, whose design was based on an erroneous idea of what a coca pod looked like; handwritten letters to the sales force, in the lovely Spencerian hand of bookkeeper Frank Robinson, who penned Coke's signature logotype; and fountain dispensers designed by that master of modern industrial design, Raymond Loewy. If Butler was going to "revive the icon," he needed to know what the icon originally looked like.

In league with Todd Brooks, group design director for global brands whom Butler had recruited from sapient, he set out to pare the flagship brand down to its core assets--the color red, the script, the ribbon, and the contour bottle. In search of an identity scheme that could be replicated across the Coke universe, Brooks and Butler established four core principles. Each design, whether it was packaging, point of sale, equipment, or any other touch point, would need to reflect bold simplicity, real authenticity, the power of red, and be "familiar yet surprising."

The two tapped the U.K.-based design firm Attik to create a global brand-identity system using those principles. The brief, says Attik's cofounder James Sommerville, was basically about decluttering through design. "It was about bringing a simplicity to the language, about the bold use of the iconic bottle, a flat red, and a flat script.... Core brands need a timeless quality."

To ensure that these new identity standards were understood throughout the 200-country system, Attik and Brooks developed a hefty global-standards book, specifying in excruciating detail every element of the design, from the placement of the white ribbon that swirls down the can to the kinds of clothes that models can wear in photographs featuring the product. Pio Schunker, who oversees both North American advertising and design, was responsible for codeveloping the system with San Francisco's Turner Duckworth, the lead North American advertising agency. "As life gets visually noisier, brands that dial back to their core essence stand out by contrast," Schunker says, pointing to Apple, Google, and Nike as examples. But for Coke, the stakes are even higher. Unlike, say, a consumer-electronics company that can make news through its latest innovation, Coke's product doesn't change. Indeed, heaven help it if it does (see New Coke). That places an even heavier burden on design, to keep the product looking fresh, appealing, and relevant.

Yet to redo everything, from the smallest paper cup to the largest tractor-trailer truck, is a multimillion-dollar investment, Schunker says. "Unlike an ad campaign, these decisions will have to last for years and years."

Butler's global brand-identity program enabled Coke's major brands--Coke, Diet Coke, and the newest, Coke Zero--to establish crystal clear, yet integrated, brand identities: red, silver, and black, embellished with script and ribbon. From that foundation, the opportunities to riff on the icon were legion.

In 2005, Butler and his team introduced sexy aluminum versions of the classic contour bottle for all three brands at clubs and entertainment venues. He also invited five design studios,

from Brazil, Japan, South Africa, the U.K., and the U.S., to produce limited-edition versions (printed with iridescent inks, which react to black light), and launched them with accompanying music and videos. In 2008, he invited eight up-and-coming Chinese artists to design bottles for the Beijing Olympics, causing a run on the Games' gift shops. Later this year, Attik will introduce a new design system for next year's World Cup in South Africa featuring modular elements that can be adapted to each competing country's needs. "It's a good design system when groups feel like they can add their own personality, but it doesn't deviate from the map," says Attik's Sommerville. "Coke has managed to achieve a foot in both camps."

I'm sitting in front of a laptop at Coke's Global Innovation Center, in an office park just down the road from the Atlanta headquarters. I've been invited to try my hand with Coke's new Design Machine, a Web-based design tool and digital-asset management system built to allow the smallest Coca-Cola marketer to create point-of-sale materials that are customized for local markets but adhere to the global brand strategy. "Junior designers in Bangalore can use this in a snap!" says Gerardo Garcia, global group design director, jinxing my test-drive before it begins.

"Pick a language," Garcia begins. I have a choice of 36. Kazakh it is. "Now a product." Of the 100 options, I'm guessing Fanta is a favorite on the steppe. "Now an occasion," he instructs. At leisure. I survey the options, and pick an image of smiling people gathered around the table, hoisting cans of Fanta; above is the message, "Open happiness!" in Kazakh. A perfect banner for my little shashlik stand in Almaty.

I hit SEND and the machine zips my design for local approval and legal review, then sends it off to the printer. The whole thing has taken less than 10 minutes.

The Design Machine addresses one of CEO Kent's major strategic goals: winning at the point of sale. What's more, it's a remarkably cost-efficient tool, reducing fees to local ad shops by 30%. And it's bonehead simple.

"We needed to develop a collaborative platform that could drive capability around the world," Garcia says. "A modular design that would allow us to scale was critical."

The machine, launched in 2007, holds more than 8,600 templates and is constantly being fed with new "best in class" materials generated around the world. So the smallest grocery store in Tokyo can take advantage of, say, the best of Turner Duckworth's work in San Francisco. And if a particularly clever designer in Guangzhou comes up with a great campaign for Chinese New Year, the work can be zapped around the planet.

Similarly, the Freestyle fountain machine may one day let local merchants tailor the selection of drinks they offer to the idiosyncratic tastes of their customers (in one test location in Atlanta, for example, Caffeine-Free Diet Coke became the third-best seller after 4 p.m.). The machine also eliminates the current need for 5-gallon bags of concentrate, replacing them with concentrated 46-ounce cartridges, reducing the product's carbon footprint drastically. What's more, an onboard computer monitors usage, enabling folks in Atlanta to analyze data about beverage consumption, peak times, and popular locations. Coke can also talk back to the machine, letting it know electronically if a particular flavor needs to be discontinued or recalled.

Both Freestyle and the Design Machine reflect Butler's efforts to integrate design and scale, to create systems that can leverage the best of both. "We were trying to create a standard of excellence around the world where it's easy to do the right thing, and difficult to do the wrong thing," he says.

As we're walking back to headquarters, Butler ticks off the countries he is planning to visit on a grueling march through Asia and South America. But there's one more thing he wants to say before we part. "This is not a design story," he tells me yet again. "I understand there are some people who would like to hear the words 'design-driven' come out of our CEO's mouth. Honestly, I don't care. We're leveraging design to drive innovation and to win at the point of sale, which is fundamental to our business. Full stop."

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