Last spring, frat boy actor Seann William Scott led a band of 52 competitors on an adventure race across Scotland. The event, sponsored by the Scottish liqueur, Drambuie, followed Bonnie Prince Charlie’s (also known as the creator of the sweet spirit’s recipe) flight from the British crown over 260 years ago. The thrill seekers raced Zapcat powerboats, mountain bikes and off-road buggies. “It was the perfect lads’ weekend,” says the company’s CEO, Phil Parnell. And, since it reintroduced the historic brand to young people around the world, it was also a marketer’s dream. Except that when the winning team posed with Drambuie’s traditional squat brown bottle there was a problem: the spirit looked like it was meant for an older demographic. “We needed to change the packaging,” says Parnell. “We had no choice but to be radical.”

Packaging overhauls are now de rigueur for spirits brands

By Noah Rothbaum
Recently the brand introduced a taller, rounder bottle with high, scalloped shoulders and a new logo of interlocking D’s. The red cap has been replaced by a fancier black closure and wrapper. And instead of dark glass, the bottle is clear so you can actually see the amber colored spirit. The back label now features cocktail suggestions to encourage people to drink Drambuie with more than just whisky or ice. “Trying to make ourselves relevant was important,” says Parnell. But “it’s not a two-minute fix. We’re not going to keep changing it.”

Nobody would blame you for not recognizing some of your old favorite bottles. From Baileys to Mount Gay Rum to Tres Generaciones Tequila to Svedka Vodka, over the last few years quite a few big names have given their packaging a makeover. Some of the changes are subtle, like the addition of a beveled edge, an extended neck or an updated logo. Others are more striking, creating an ambitious new look from scratch. A design can take months and even years as a company weighs the many options to find the perfect bottle shape, label and box.

While brands have always tried to stimulate sales with redesigns, an eye-catching bottle is now more important than ever as an unprecedented selection of spirits fight for the attention of drinkers. Not to mention that classics now have to compete with stylish upstarts like Domaine de Canton, Maestro Dobel Diamond Tequila, (rī), St-Germain, TY KU and Crystal Head, which have untraditional and impressive packaging.

But updating a brand comes with some serious risks. Any time “a product has become less effective the first thing people say is ‘what should we change? How can we make it look trendier?’” says the preeminent graphic designer, Milton Glaser, who has decades of experience and created the I Love New York logo, Brooklyn Brewery’s packaging and the Trump Vodka bottle. For Glaser, the decision to redesign comes down to intuition. But he warns “you have to worry about losing the audience you have before you can acquire a new audience.” Alienating loyal customers is a surefire way for a brand to lose its credibility and when shoppers are so used to the old packaging that they can’t even find the new bottle on the shelves, then a spirit company is in serious trouble.

The other potential problem with a redesign is that consumers often associate a change in packaging with a change in content. And “if you promise a change and it doesn’t occur, then where are you? And if you make a change and it’s not the one the public wants you suffer for it,” says Glaser. “All of these can be the life or death of a company.”

To avoid making this tough decision, up until recently, many brands were content to use an off-the-shelf bottle that they wouldn’t change for years. But with the rise of pricey vodka and premium spirits in general, packaging design has become hugely important. Already, many expensive whiskies, Cognacs and Champagnes come in custom-ordered crystal decanters and presentation boxes. Now companies, both big and small, are revamping their whole product lines.

### Upscale Presentation

This past spring Mount Gay began repacking its line of rum in new more upscale bottles. (The changeover is expected to be finished by the end of next year.) The brand’s Extra Old Rum was the first to be given a facelift. Since 1992 the company had used a plain, tall, round bottle, which featured a large off-white label. The Extra Old Rum is now packed in an impressive oval bottle that has a cork and a smaller black label. Yet Mount Gay insists it is about more than
just packaging. “This introduction is not about a bottle redesign, it’s about re-inventing the brand as a whole,” brand director Eric Maldonado said in a statement at the time of the launch of the new bottle. “At the end of the day, the bottle and packaging cues speak to the long heritage of the brand and the premium quality of the liquid inside.”

The Dalmore Scotch Whisky has also taken a step away from its traditional look towards a more contemporary design while still embracing its history. The newly designed bottle has placed an added importance on its iconic royal stag, gifted by King Alexander III in 1263. “We have sought to de-clutter our designs and make a powerful visual statement using the stag,” points out David Robertson, head of brand for The Dalmore. “The branding is also embossed and foiled, adding a more premium touch to our look and feel.”

Even value spirits are getting new packaging. Martini & Rossi, which has just introduced a sparkling rosé to its portfolio, also has a new, elegant look. The cuvée bottle now features a newly lengthened neck and redesigned silver label, giving it a timeless look. In the fall of 2007, Martini & Rossi also debuted a premium bottle for its vermouths, as well as crown cap closure for their Prosecco.

Svedka, the modestly priced Swedish vodka, unveiled a new statuesque bottle just over a year ago, which replaced a broader, plainer bottle that had been used since its inception. “The Svedka packaging hadn’t had a facelift in 10 years, and the time was right based on the brand’s dramatic growth trajectory both on- and off-premise,” says Marina Hahn, chief marketing officer, Spirits Marque One (Constellation Brands), which owns and imports the brand. Not a small consideration. “Vodka is the most cutthroat category in the store,” says Michael Binstein, owner of the Chicago area Binny’s Beverage Depot chain. “You can’t afford to have lackluster packaging.” Svedka’s new bottle also supports the brand’s overall strategy of positioning itself as a premium spirit at an affordable price, which has definitely driven sales. “Svedka is breaking into the big leagues,” says Binstein. “It’s turning into a Goliath.”

Svedka isn’t the only vodka guising itself up to attract shoppers. Stolichnaya introduced a new taller and thinner bottle this past winter. And Karlsson’s Gold Vodka, which has been around for just two years, has also already made a packaging switch. When the brand launched it used a medicine-like bottle. After Karlsson’s ramped up production last year they had Hans Brindfors, (he created Absolut’s famous bottle) come up with a new look. Karlsson’s bottle is now round, tapered on the top and bottom, and mirrors the shape of the vodka’s key ingredient potatoes.

**Vintage Style**

Some of the redesigns are so fitting it’s hard to remember that they’re new. Highland Park now comes in a hefty flasque-like glass bottle with an embossed logo and a wide-neck with a cork stopper. The old-timey packaging looks like it dates back to the founding of the distillery in 1798. But it’s actually a lot younger. The company created the bottle just a few years ago and it began appearing on store shelves in the fall of 2006. It replaced a dull conventional bottle that the brand had been using for about five years. “We lost our way in our packaging,” admits Jason Craig, the global controller for Highland Park. While the old bottle got low marks the single malt was winning big awards around the world. “The clothing was wrong for the spirit within,” says Craig. He wanted the new packaging to look authentic and be evocative of the whisky’s long history but not look too new or shiny. The design is based on a miniature bottle that dates back to 1905, which Craig found in the back of a cupboard at the distillery. And the font for the label’s logo was taken from the distillery’s 140-year-old front gate. Not only is the new
packaging more aesthetically pleasing but it has also helped to boost sales. “The proof is in the pudding,” points out Craig. From 2006 through 2008, the brand almost doubled its global sales and tripled its profits.

One reason it has been successful is that single malt drinkers tend to do their homework and actually read the labels and the info on the boxes. “It’s a small niche market,” says Michael Hyatt, president of Baltimore’s Wells Discount Liquors, which has been open since 1937. And “by and large they keep up with it.”

Flask-like bottles are popular for other whiskies, too. For about 12 years, the lowland distillery, Auchentoshan, used a simple clear wine-like bottle. The company introduced a new slender oval bottle at the end of last year. “It definitely needed a change,” says Robin Coupar, senior brand manager of single malts at Skyy Spirits, which imports the whisky. The classily bottle speaks to the distillery’s long history of producing whisky and is embossed with three pot stills, since Auchentoshan is the only Scottish single malt to have a third distillation. While the brand’s new bottle looks traditional it is also meant to have a contemporary feel. “We wanted to make it relevant to a younger emerging malt consumer,” adds Coupar. For the label the company chose a modern clean font and a set of “strong contemporary colors,” including burgundy, gray and blue.

**The Subtle Look**

Even Johnnie Walker is trying to modernize – a little. The updates have been “more evolutionary than revolutionary,” admits Bill Topf, vice president of marketing at Diageo. “We don’t want to make any big changes.” In 2004 the ubiquitous Black Label bottle was tweaked slightly. If you look closely you’ll notice one of the changes, the so called ‘Striding Man,’ now faces right instead of left. Then three years later the box was given a makeover. “Our carton didn’t have the shelf standout,” Topf points out. That same year the company also introduced a new bottle for its Gold Label, which was originally introduced in 1995. “We wanted to make it more contemporary,” adds Topf, so the bottle is now made of clear glass instead of brown glass, which shows off the color of the whisky. It also has a slightly more “masculine” feel with stronger shoulders. And to meet an increasing demand for the whisky, after the redesign the company introduced 1 L and even larger 1.75 L bottles of Gold Label, which joined the 200 ml and 750 ml bottles it already offered.

One thing that hasn’t changed is the blend’s signature square bottle. It was originally chosen over 100 years ago not because of how it looked but because it was easier to pack in a crate and wouldn’t move around as much in transit. And the famous angled label was used because that way you could fit more text without making the font tiny. “They were being efficient,” says Topf. And “it turned out to be iconic.”

Two other spirits icons, Beefeater and Plymouth Gin, have also both modernized their bottles. In June 2006, Plymouth traded in its old round bottle adorned with a large image of the Mayflower for a sleek square Art Deco bottle with a smaller label that emphasizes the brand’s name. Don’t worry pilgrims, the famous vessel is still featured on the face of the bottle. The design was inspired by a bottle that the brand used for the Australian market in the 1930s. “The idea was to make a connection with Plymouth Gin’s success in that period when cocktail culture was at its peak,” explains Simon Ford, Pernod Ricard’s director of on-premise portfolio specialists. Pernod’s other famous gin, Beefeater, released an updated bottle in February 2007. Not only did they keep the square bottle shape but it’s now even more of a square than its predecessor. The label was also streamlined and the famous Yeoman was
given a makeover. He’s a little more fit and his silver beard is now a more youthful brown. Aaron Bernstein, co-owner of Washington, DC’s Calvert Woodley, likes the new Beefeater bottle. “It sets it off from surrounding bottles,” he says. “When it’s different everybody looks at it.”

When Hpnotiq first launched in 2002, the bottle was known for its striking blue color. Now under the domain of Heaven Hill Distilleries, Hpnotiq has undergone a subtle makeover. The bottle shape and color remain the same yet to make it more user-friendly, the natural, exotic fruit juices in the recipe are played up on the front, where a silver swirl takes the place of cluttered letters, while the back tells customers how to best use the liqueur. Tapping into the new look, Hpnotiq also has a creative ad campaign that matches; the tag line for their trade is “We’re not ashamed to admit it. We’ve had a little work done.”

But some of the changes in package design aren’t intended for consumers at all. “Before you even cross the bar, some bottles are more friendly to bartenders,” notes Chad Solomon, a drinks consultant and co-founder of cocktail catering company Cuff & Buttons. A number of companies, including Drambuie and Stolichnaya, have introduced new bottles that are easier for bartenders to grab and pour. “A consumer is never going to see that,” Solomon points out.

The consumer will see many of the other changes. For a number of brands, new packaging is part of a larger campaign to move out of a bar’s well and into the view of drinkers. And it’s no accident that some of these new untraditional bottles won’t fit in the speed rail below the bar. “A lot of these bottles are designed to sit on the back bar and get guests’ attention,” says Solomon. They also feature labels and distinctive bottle shapes that are recognizable from six feet away.

A redesigned bottle also often means that store owners will have to do some rearranging. If a brand makes their bottle taller or wider it may no longer fit on its old shelf. When that happens Bernstein says the bottle is often moved to the roomier and more desirable top shelf. “I have to believe they knew that was going to happen,” he says. Agreed.

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**HOW CAN GOOD-LOOKING BOTTLEs BOOST YOUR BUSINESS?**

Jerald O’Kennard, director of the Beverage Testing Institute in Chicago, has much expertise in determining which spirits bottles are successes and which are flops. Here are his reasons for why bartenders and retailers need to pay attention to the look of a bottle:

- There’s no one thing that determines whether a package is successful or not. Whatever it looks like, it needs to convey the essence of the product and reinforce its image. When a bottle captures a product’s history and mission, then it stands out and creates interest among consumers.

- While bartenders care most about the quality of a liquor and how it translates to making cocktails (rightly so), if they are showing off a bottle to customers they want to look good doing it. It’s secondary but if it’s an eye-catching package, it seals the deal. Packaging is even more important now that the marketplace is so crowded.

- Fancy designs aren’t always the most practical. In the name of creativity a designer might not realize that the handle, for example, is on the wrong side making it difficult for a bartender to pour. Or it’s too big, and it takes up two precious spaces on the backbar. If a bottle is inconvenient for a bartender and they don’t want to use it, you’re lost. You can’t build a brand without a bartender.

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**BOTTLE MAKEOVERS**

**Before**

1 Bottle
Unique diamond shape bottle; less rounded than older version

2 Label
Brighter vibrant green label emphasizes Hornitos branding over Sauza logo

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**After**

1 Bottle
New silver swirl logo replaces busy letters. New logo features cleaner type

2 After
New logo features cleaner type