
Rediscovering your brand's True North: How Crayola articulates its brand identity using integrated marketing to compel change in internal culture and consumer communication

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Abstract

Renewing our childhood spirit! Since the turn of the 20th Century, Crayola has been practically synonymous with crayons and colour. But at one point in its history, Crayola nearly lost sight of the most important consumers — children. This paper describes the internal revitalisation of one of the most cherished children's brands. It shows how the necessary tools were developed to reinvigorate the corporate culture and excite consumers with a passion for creative play. The final outcome of these efforts is an inspiring 'true north' articulation — a rallying cry which unites 'Crayolians' all over the world and creates a deeper, more meaningful purpose in our partnership with parents and education to help them raise inspired, creative children.

Keywords

corporate culture, creativity, innovation, True North, brand identity, mission statement, brand manifesto

INTRODUCTION

Joining Crayola as a Vice President of Marketing was an exhilarating experience. As an executive used to dealing with

turnaround situations, I relished the opportunity of leading such a truly cherished brand — with universal awareness, deep emotional connection to its consumers

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and even the iconic smell. The key goal for this new job was deciding how the legacy of Crayola as a *symbol of childhood* could be both preserved and built upon.

A symbol of childhood ... The idea presented itself plainly enough. Crayola represented children and all of the colourful, creative energy contained in their ever-expanding minds. All Crayola employees seemed to understand this intuitively. But something more was needed — something chiselled with an iron crayon in a concrete colouring page. A guide was needed that set forth all that Crayola stood for since its inception in 1903 and one that would take us far into the 21st century.

Such a manifesto would provide a ‘true north compass’, which would incite a positive shift within the corporate culture and cut a clear path so that the purchase of every Crayola product led straight to the door of creative inspiration. This is the story of how it came to be.

A COLOURFUL JOURNEY BEGINS ...

To understand where one is going, it is first important to reflect upon where one has been. Crayola has a long 108-year-old history. It begins with two men and a girl (Figure 1), and two colours: red and black. In 1885, cousins Harold Smith and Edwin Binney started the aptly-named company, Binney & Smith. The company produced red oxide pigment, which was used in barn paint, and carbon black, used mainly in the manufacture of car tyres.

Now, about the girl. While business was thriving, Edwin Binney’s interests extended beyond the coloration of barns and tyres. His wife Alice was a school-teacher with a passion for education and the betterment of children’s lives. She was Edwin’s muse, an instrumental influence



Figure 1 Alice Binney, C. Harold Smith and Edwin Binney

on him both in life and in business. In 1890, prompted by requests from teachers and urged by Alice, Binney & Smith introduced slate school pencils and the first dustless chalk for use in classrooms. The seed of what was eventually to become ‘Crayola’ was planted.

In 1903, Edwin was once again inspired to action by Alice’s work in the classroom. While slate pencils were a valuable school tool, the Binney & Smith partnership was originally founded on *colour*. And so, recognising the need for safe, quality, wax crayons for children, Binney & Smith produced the first box of eight Crayola¹ crayons (Figure 2). But the genius was not in the invention of the tool itself. After all, pigmented wax and



Figure 2 The first box of eight Crayola wax crayons

coloured sticks had been around for centuries. The real innovation was in creating a tool that was affordable for most children. Since then, children and educators continue to be at the centre of everything Crayola does.

It takes a woman

Alice Binney coined the name 'Crayola', which comes from *craie*, the French word for chalk, and 'ola', from oleaginous (ie containing oil).

In the next 108 years the company and the Crayola brand expanded, introducing numerous new products for children to use in school and at home. From the single 8-count box of crayons, the product line grew to an aisle full of creative play products for children of all ages and interests. Yet that journey was in no way homogeneous.

Over the course of the first 70 years, Binney & Smith developed a strong overriding mission — to help children learn and play in colourful ways. In fact, to this day the company historians still do not know whether Edwin and Harold ever made a profit on the Crayola brand until their passing in the 1930s. However, an unwavering dedication to the greater purpose of their business ensured that results would follow. The company and the brand grew rapidly in awareness, usage and meaning.

An icon is born

One of the most iconic Crayola products, the 64-count crayon box with a built-in crayon sharpener (Figure 3), was introduced in 1958.

Losing our way

Fulfilling as the first 70 years were, the ensuing 30 were fraught with many



Figure 3 The Crayola 64-count box with a built-in sharpener

unique challenges. The world was changing rapidly — shifts in how children spent their free time were brought on by a growth in technology, and economic and political upheaval. As Mike Perry, Crayola's president and CEO, discovered while poring over old operating plans and talking to countless Crayola retirees, the path was not immune to these phenomena. Somewhere between the energy crisis, the economic recession and the end of the baby boom, Crayola started losing its way. The articulation of business strategies in planning documents show that the company was beginning to lose sight of children and its role in their lives. Crayola was beginning to be thought of as an *ever-green* brand with limited growth potential.

'This shift was evident in the language reflected in the company documents with increasing focus on the business as a function of declining birth rates and commodity pricing. But the bigger miss was what you *didn't* see (in these documents) — language about the unlimited potential of the brand and the children it serves.'

Mike Perry, CEO Crayola LLC

Happily, while this was a reflection of the prevailing opinion at the time, all was not lost. While not central to the business dialogue, the company's mission lived in the hearts and minds of many Crayolians,

who passionately believed in Crayola's special meaning for children.

Getting back on track

Now, fast-forward to 2004. The company's CEO, Mark Schwab, recognised the need to reinvent how Crayola approached new product development. The company revamped its organisational structure, and a new innovation process which enabled new capabilities was put in place. The results were almost immediate — Crayola reinvented itself and its product line and growth exploded with new and exciting ways for children to create (Figure 4).

But there was another big impact of this work — an increasingly obvious need to express once again what the company and the brand stand for.

As the company expands and grows, what key principles should guide the way? A clear compass was needed to guide decisions on what businesses to be in, the opportunities that should be pursued, and how these opportunities come to life. Once again, the company culture needed to be infused with the purposefulness and vision of the role Crayola serves in the world, and why it matters. Crayolians seem to have a shared understanding of Crayola's

core essence, it was time what was felt intuitively by all was captured. It was critical to find the right words and emotion to capture and project *True North* in a way that would last for generations to come.

Assembling our cartographers

The work began with enlisting the help of Adam Morgan and Chad Dick from *Eat Big Fish*, a consulting firm specialising in helping brands discover what they stand for.

Next, a cross-functional team of thought leaders throughout the company was assembled. The selection process was very thoughtfully conducted. Each candidate was carefully considered and debated. The casting was critical to the work itself and to the embedding process that would follow. Some of the most important criteria were:

- *Strong ability for conceptual thinking*
- *Functional expertise* — it was important not to be marketing-centric. Rather, a range of perspectives and experiences to help fuel the debate was wanted.
- *Influential role* — not necessarily most senior, but people with ability to lead and persuade.

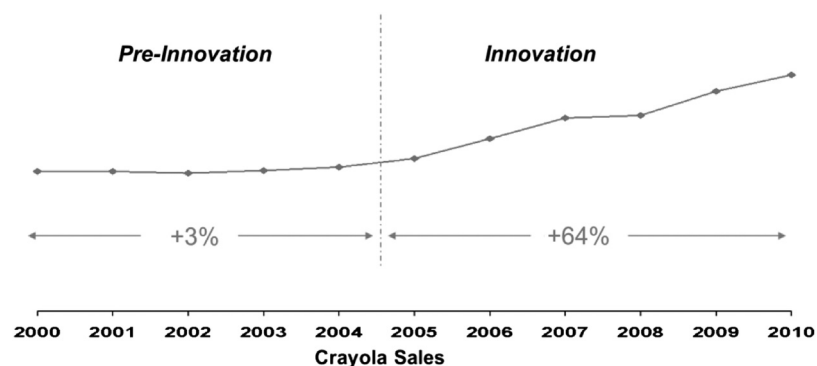


Figure 4 Product line and growth increase greatly with changes to organisational structure and innovation processes

- *Seniority* — a range across all levels in the organisation, with enough senior representation to ensure alignment and endorsement of the output.
- *Outside perspective* — representation of non-Crayolians to help challenge internal orthodoxies.

In the end, the hardest decision was to ensure that the size of the group did not exceed 25–30 people. After much debate, there was a list of final candidates — a cross-functional group that included marketers, designers, art directors, digital marketers and partner agencies, all of whom eagerly accepted the challenge.

Questions about our destination

As the journey began, homework was assigned to a select few within the larger group. Their job was to create the kind of stimulus that the group would use to jump-start the dialogue. There was talk about the rich history of the company, the chromo-chemi-mechatronic (a coined mash-up of colour, chemical effects and mechanical engineering) magic in the products, the origin and magic of colour, key challenges and aspirations, etc. Several key questions were also identified that were important to ensure clarity of outcome.

What is the challenge being faced? Why is this important?

There are so many heartfelt stories of adults who still remember how special they felt when they opened their brand new box of Crayola Crayons, deeply inhaling the unmistakable fragrance, and giddy at the sight of those fresh, pristine points. Stories are also heard of many who desperately wished for their very own box of 64 Crayons: a box that was just out of

reach because their families could afford to buy only a 24-count box.

As these children grew up, Crayola continued to occupy a special place in their hearts and minds, associated with special memories of all things childlike. And as they became parents, Crayola became part of a shared experience with their own children, a rite of passage of sorts.

Yet the competition for share of mind and time is much more intense for children today than it was 25 or 30 years ago. When today's children become tomorrow's parents, will Crayola occupy an equally special place in their hearts and minds, as an equally cherished symbol of childhood to pass on to their children in turn?

The answer was believed to be not only in what the company makes. Of course, high-quality products that are unquestionably safe and trusted by mothers are made. But there is a bigger purpose to the company's existence — the role played in consumers' lives.

What really is the business? What is the purpose?

So what is that role? This question generated passionate debate. On one side, the majority, argued that the company was focused on children. Products and services offered can be expanded, but the focus must remain on children. On the other side, an enthusiastic minority advocated that Crayola is first and foremost about creativity. So why not expand the horizon with products and services targeting adults as well as children? Imagine the growth possibilities if the focus were shifted to spreading creativity among 'our own inner child'.

After several rich debating sessions a stake was put in the ground, focusing on three questions that helped to define and guide all aspects of the ongoing discourse.

What is the core belief that drives the company and the brand?

The first question was: If it were wanted to bottle Crayola's specialness, what exactly would be being bottled? Going forward, what role is it wanted to play in consumers' lives and why does it matter? What is really believed in and why? What are the boundaries needing to be drawn so that bounds are not overstepped?

What is offered to consumers? How are they helped?

How do the products made today align with the vision going forward ... or do they? What are the important criteria to inform decisions on what products and opportunities to pursue and how these ideas come to life? Do we have a credible role in addressing the need identified?

What are the important cultural and business implications?

This effort was not about an annual advertising campaign. The focus had to be on the internal implications of the vision by answering questions such as: How is it wanted to change the culture? What are the guidelines for the future? How will the expectation be communicated to all Crayolians going forward? How are those expectations and practices cascaded and embedded? How is this belief brought to life in everything done, internally and externally?

Mapping it Out

Over the next four months, the team dedicated about 20 per cent of their time to this effort. They worked tirelessly to debate, answer and evolve these questions. There was debate, argument and the flushing-out of options 'to try them on

for size'. Small incubation teams worked independently and with the full project team. There was talk about 'zebra'd elephants and a purple octopus going to the moon', all the stuff of children's imagination. The creativity crisis in America was discussed and there was argument about the role that could or should be played in that debate. Culture values statements were rewritten and product fit evaluation criteria were redefined. Both the ideas and the words were debated and there was much talk about the implications of each path.

At the end of the journey, the single most important outcome was a brand manifesto, a single one-page document that in absence of everything else would clearly define mission and values in a compelling and ownable way. This was a declaration of the company's purpose and the brand's True North:

- We see our purpose in the world as helping parents and teachers raise inspired, creative children. Why? Because these children will one day lead the world as inspired, creative adults!
- We believe children are the most creative and original beings in the world. We believe in unleashing the originality that naturally exists in every child
- We offer children ideas, inspiration and tools to free colourfully the 'What If...?' that lies in the heart and mind of every child

The written manifesto was a clear deliverable of this project so everyone expected it. But the team did not know about a video expressing the essence of the collaborative outcome. Known to only a select few, the video was completed by the advertising agency, McGarry Bowen, in about a week. The effect was an amazing inspirational rip! Exactly how people felt

was known just by looking at their faces as they watched the video. It had been nailed. The visuals were found that in about two-and-a-half minutes expressed the essence of the new Crayola manifesto. The answer had been found to what would be bottled for the next 100 years, and a rallying cry that would capture the spirit of True North.

This video would become a powerful internal tool to share Crayola's vision with every single Crayolian across the world.

Our manifesto...

The Crayola *Inspire* video shows the brand manifesto online, at www.Crayola.com.

Souvenirs from the trip

As the journey was completed, a logical question became — so now what? The first course of business was to embed the True North ideas in our corporate culture.

- An employee immersion programme focused on True North and what it means in everyday responsibilities was developed.

- Company culture statements were changed in a way that was truly inspired by children and the True North.
- Crayolians were encouraged to transform their workspaces.
- A new corporate look and feel was designed that reflected the spirit of True North in new company IDs and business cards.
- Even the look of the physical environment was changed in a very simple but highly symbolic way.

The net was cast wide. This is one of the most important things the company has ever done and it had to be done right (see Figures 5–8)

The road ahead

While the internal culture changes were powerful and highly symbolic, it was exciting to talk to parents about the Crayola brand in a more meaningful way. The key goal was to elevate the conversation beyond the products made. The company makes a lot of colourful, high-quality, safe products very well. But Crayola as a brand is about partnering



Figure 5 Company culture statements before and after



Figure 6 A workspace transformed



Figure 7 New company ID and business card



Figure 8 The physical environment before and after

with parents and educators in raising inspired, creative children. The aim is to help parents achieve their inspiration to raise balanced, well-rounded children and help them develop a strong sense of self through expressing their original thoughts and ideas. It is intended to help offer insights, support and solutions and elevate the conversation to this higher level.

We passionately believe in this idea, but we wanted to hear directly from parents what they thought about our message. So we took our message on the road. We fielded a uniquely designed piece of consumer research that enabled us to share our manifesto in written and visual form, and get deep insights from parents about how relevant it was and what specific elements of the message were most compelling. We learned what words and visuals were most impactful, what the overall takeaway was and what difference

the manifesto made on how these parents viewed the Crayola brand. What we heard was not only exciting but inspirational. Here are some of the quotes:

‘Although I have always liked Crayola as a brand, this statement makes me want to applaud.’

‘I had thought of them as business people, neither bad, nor good. Now, I think of them as partners!’

‘I had thought of them as business people, neither bad, nor good. Now, I think of them as partners!’

‘I never explored this aisle of the store, but with a vision statement like this, I am going down that aisle!!’

CONCLUSION

We are now embarking on the next part of our journey, bringing our True North

to life in a dialogue with consumers. Prime among our present and future goals is to advocate for, enable and celebrate arts-infused education in school and creative play at home.

In a way, we've come full circle. Alice Binney was a mother and teacher who long ago inspired her husband to create safe, affordable crayons for her classroom. That tradition continues today, with a

renewed focus on inspiring kids and being inspired by them. With a 'true-north compass' in our back pocket we can go on, making products for creatively-alive kids and expanding on the equity we've generated with parents and teachers alike.

Reference

- (1) Crayola is a registered trade mark of Crayola LLC, Forks Township, Northampton County, PA.