

The Evolution of Skateboard Branding: How the skateboard branding industry has changed since the 70s

How can an obsession with one sport lead someone to their calling as a graphic designer, working in the visual arts? As a born and bred skateboarder, I discovered my absolute perfect suitability to the world of graphic design and branding thanks to my youthful years spent covered in bruises from continuous skateboard falls, and more glorious moments of stunning airborne tricks.

It all started when I took a closer, more curious-minded look at the piece of wooden equipment in my hand whose entire package brought me so much joy and excitement...

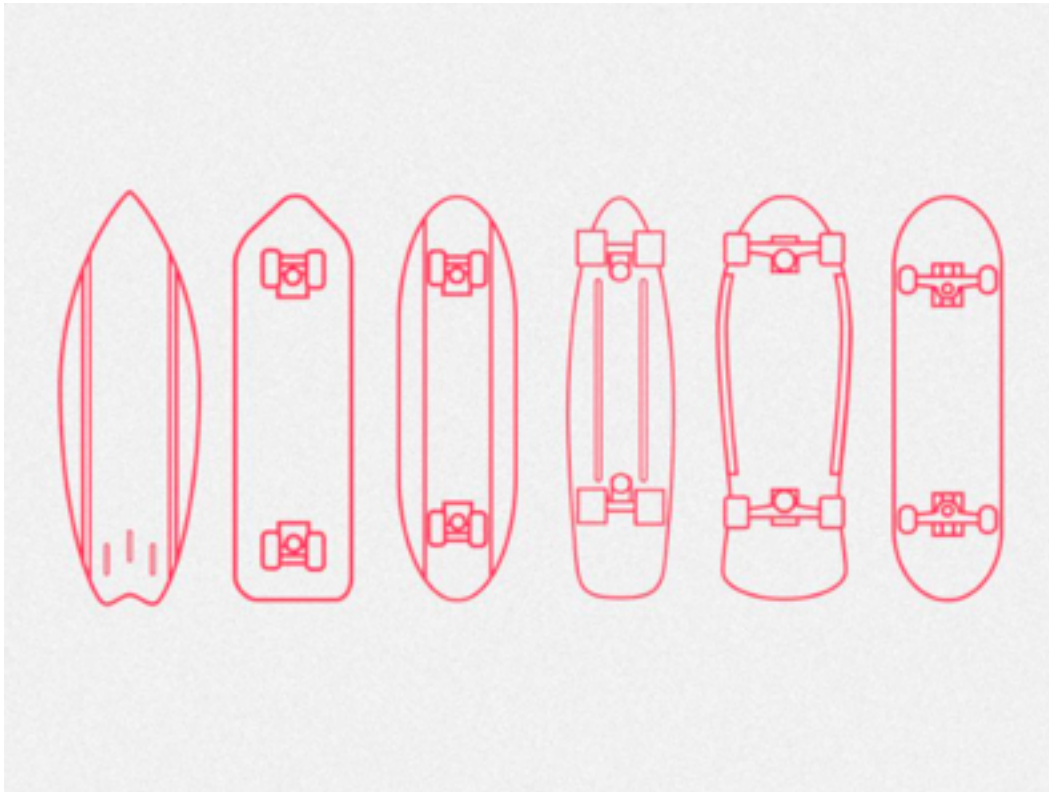
After several years of working with product designers, I have often found myself moved to dig deep into the product development history of the humble slice of wood which sped me mercilessly across flat pavement and swung me (equally mercilessly, if not more so) around the dodgy curves of skateboard rinks. What had inspired this singular activity?

What intrigued me even more was what was found underneath the board, the most important part, which strangely no one ever sees while the board is on the move. The graphics, the design, the art, the character and personality of a skateboard is held in its underbelly - and the fact that it's hidden most of the time, makes its branding history and the evolution of skateboarding styles all the more intriguing.

Skateboard branding, so to speak, had a shaky start throughout the 60s and 70s. Of course, it was invented in California in the 1950s, in a sort of spontaneous move to mimic surfing - on the road. Its eventual growth and spike in popularity in the 1970s is largely due to the developments made in the *design of the board*.

An object which started as a wooden box with roller skate wheel tacked to the bottom, a mere surfer's toy, was propelled into the limelight when in 1972 Frank Nasworthy invented the urethane skateboard wheels. The well-known image of skating low to the ground was soon established by the Zephyr team, and has remained a central and symbolic position for all visual skateboarding campaigns.

The 80s and 90s saw the rise of the underground, grunge skater trend, and around this time, smaller skateboard companies started cropping up. New creative work was carried out on skateboards, in terms of style, shape, design, and visual graphics. What began as a hypothetical surfboard of the roads, slowly morphed into the skateboard as we know it today.



<https://bit.ly/2CuWtor>

The early 90s were the decades of the edgy, punk music skater, whose attitude needed to be reflected in their skating accessories. Companies realised they had to match the board with the skater, and identified the personal connection which existed between them. As a graphic designer, I see this stage in skateboarding history as particularly interesting, because in the early 80s it was still considered to be an anti-establishment, rebel form of subculture, yet it was also becoming a new form of movement and art, which involved a great deal of personal discovery and discipline.

If you've ever failed the same miniscule section of the most simple trick, several hundred times in a row, you'll understand what I'm saying here. This personal aspect needed to be reflected in the style and design of the board itself, as skaters began to form their identity

around the sport - the accessory's aesthetics needed to be reflective of the skater's personality, and show off an image which they would be proud to carry.

Post 90s, and the number of skateboarding brands on the market exploded, representing a range of skating looks from completely minimal to extremely eclectic. Changes in technological innovation, experimentation in design, the addition of digital media in elevating brand names, and changing perspectives around the skateboarding culture as a whole, has made skateboard branding an extremely interesting, diverse, and exciting market.

The importance of design research has also increased dramatically, as different target audiences from different age groups consume media and advertisements in different ways. The way I see it, product branding and design in this industry should always be committed to pushing skateboarding as a culture, as both a sport and a fun activity, so that it is accessible to everyone. Appealing to people's aesthetic preferences and styles is the very best way to do this.

Over the years, pop culture, food habits, cultural trends, art, and lifestyle preferences have all made an appearance in and contributed to the evolution of the skateboard branding world. Alien Workshop is a great example of skateboard branding responding to the times, and immediately set the company apart from competing skateboard art with its timeless aesthetics, inspired by themes of UFO encounters and conspiracy theories.

Their logo is also a pretty nifty example of clever design, in line with the mysterious and elusive subject matter of the brand, as it contains a hidden message which reads "Neil B" when read backwards, after co-founder Neil Blender.



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Creature is another timeless example of a culture-inspired skating brand, as they were inspired by B movie graphics and appealed to transition skaters.



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Krooked Skateboards represents the more artistic side of skateboard design, as they incorporate founder Mark Gonzales' original art work and personal vision of skateboarding. Founded in 2002, Mark's work continues to challenge product designers, as he supplies his designs in the form of collages, scribbled on napkins and shopping bags, and sketched with Sharpies.

He shows that skateboard graphic design can be a vehicle of artistic and personal expression which looks beyond the visual impression of fancy tricks.



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Geographic location has also influenced skateboarding branding over the years. Given that this has mostly centered around cities and urban settings, skateboard design and branding has often taken influence from its surroundings with graphics which speak of

different locations. For example, NYC-style boards incorporate the city's signature foods such as pizza, bagels, pretzels, hot-dogs, and donuts, while San Francisco boasts mac-and-cheese graphics.

What I find most fascinating about the connection between graphic design and skateboarding and their evolutionary relationship over the years, is skateboard branding's affiliation with the fast-food and wellness industries (respectively, of course). The aesthetics behind fast-food advertising played a major part in the skateboard branding story.

Originally, us skateboarders were not exactly known for our conscious foodie tendencies, and have historically subsisted on famous \$1 pizza slices and vending-machine canned sodas. That pop when you flick the can open is a stellar throwback to the funky, laid back, grunge image which characterized the first few decades of the skateboarding branding industry.

Jeremy Klein's skateboard designs are an ode to this era, with his portrayals of giant candy bars stomping on vegetables, appealing to the immature and rebellious skater-kid who hates healthy food and loves the sugary stuff.

And it's not only the skateboard itself which is the main focus of skateboard branding and graphics. The whole lifestyle which goes along with it is also part of the brand package which you create for yourself as a skater figure. For the first few decades of skateboarding, enthusiasts of the sport found sustenance in fast food chains and beverage industries such as Pepsi, McDonald's, Doritos, and Carl's Jr.

This was mainly down to two reasons: convenience, and branding. The original skateboarder style of the 90s and onwards was matched and answered by not just the aesthete of these chains' visual branding on their products, but by their whole advertising message - fast, sweet, veins pumping with sugar fuel, which instantly lit up faces with happiness and glee. Attractive, right?

Television advertisements over the years have boasted colorful scenes of flying, talented skateboarders, whose abilities increase tenfold after one sip of the beverage. When you think of drinks like Fanta, Coca Cola, Pepsi, and all these fizzy drinks, all of their

advertising efforts have been built upon this image of carefree energy, and video clips of laid-back youths, and a community of fellow carefree soda drinkers who find connection through not only through their passion for the sport, but for the sudden and majestic realization that consuming fast food will increase their trick range by tenfold.

VICE points out that “Historically, beverage companies like Red Bull and Monster have latched on to skateboarding’s “xtreme” image.” The color palette and graphics included in fast-food branding meet that of the skateboarding industry - bright colors, eclectic graphics and design, filled with motion which blasts across the screen with an excitement and adrenaline which parallel the rushing thrill of skateboarding.

It was the perfect match, not only in terms of pairing these two branding patterns, but in appealing to the audience and target market of the sport. Skateboarders were concerned with only one thing, skateboarding, certainly not cooking organic meals and relaxing over dinner, or wasting precious energy considering the nutritional value of what they were consuming.

Fast food joints and sugar-laden drinks were the natural, “cool,” convenient excuse. Clutching a can of Fanta or Coke in one hand was just the natural accompanying accessory to the skateboard under your other arm. Not to mention that these products were often most readily available in the areas and locations most frequented by the earliest skateboarders, before any designated locations were provided in the following years as the trend evolved and expanded from its original audience base.

When reminiscing on the first few decades of skateboarding, veteran pro skater Karl Watson recalls spending a lot of time in 7-11 parking lots, where snack aisles were readily available, or at fast food locations which offered ample space for skateboarding, as well as an easy, cheap refuel station.

“When we first started skating there was no such thing as diet,” Karl explains. From corn chips, to slurpees, to hamburgers, fizzy drinks and candy, skateboarders wanted all the fast food they could get their hands on. This branding image translated into skateboard graphics, and even in 2014, before health food movements kicked off, the coolest skateboard designs needed to incorporate some colorful element of cartoon pizzas, sharp

sketches of crushed soda cans, liquor bottle designs, piles of greasy French fries, bodega snacks, and bottles of hot sauce.

Skateboard design has always been about incorporating a skateboarder's personality into their board. During the first few decades of skateboarding, this went hand-in-hand with an association with and eagerness towards the fast food industry. Endorsements also played a massive part, as skating companies partnered with the fast food industry in advertising campaigns and board design and branding.



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However, according to VICE, “skateboarders aren’t treating their bodies like garbage cans anymore.” This is as a result of the growing health movement and consumer consciousness surrounding what we put in our bodies and where our food comes from, especially for athletes and active people. This has had an effect on skateboarding branding and the lifestyle which goes with it.

The rise of social media has placed extreme importance on physical aesthetics, one which is not exactly met by the nutrients provided by an all fast-food diet. Prominent skateboarding figures now have a voice, and their followers are impressed and influenced by a more conscious approach when it comes to diet, so skaters are following the health trend and jumping on movements such as veganism, paleo, gluten-free, and sugar free diets.

Instead of Red Bull and Fanta, pro skaters like Eric Koston and Paul Rodriguez are leaning on the coconut water trend, adding a superfood, eco and tropical vibe to skateboarding branding with their company Villager Goods.

Brands are even facing backlash with their previous graphics of burgers, which now carry negative connotations of animal cruelty which a growing number of athletes don’t want to be associated with, including those in the skating industry. Blind design’s burger symbol by Jason Lee received harsh criticism from Mike Vallely, an outspoken vegetarian, who left the company soon after this board design was released. This type of design won’t impress whole audiences anymore.

Another major advancement in and contribution to the skateboarding branding world has been the rise of women in skateboarding, in both the competitive and branding side, with Lisa Whitaker leading the game with Meow Skateboards.



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Skateboarding has become an extremely universal sport, and its branding reflects this as it accommodates for a diverse audience. SKATISM positions itself as skating's first diversity magazine, and tells stories of niches within the industry such as Israeli skate yoga and skating for trans women.

Brands tell stories, and the more full and representative the skating community becomes, the more room and opportunity there is for exciting graphic representation and response, as it no longer pivots solely around the California or punk lifestyles.

Personally, I definitely believe that skateboarding naturally attracts a creative audience, and our affinity with different brands is an expression of the designer within us all. The sport itself can be seen as an art, a creative expression, striving towards an abstract creation which sometimes (and often) fails. But when it succeeds, is utterly enthralling, and seemingly otherworldly, just like every major visually creative achievement this world has seen.

Whatever the time period, whatever the media trends, whatever the technology available, one constant remains: graphics sell skateboards, and good artwork is what ultimately commands the attention and influences the consumer's final purchase choice. It's up to graphic and product designers whether they choose to go with the flow and answer demand, or risk disrupting the industry by entering into more innovative brand partnerships, and pushing the boundaries of advertising.