

# PRODESIGN

WHERE DESIGN MEETS BUSINESS

april / may 2005

\$7.50

## Let it b\_E\_E

BRIGID HARDY IS THE BRAINS BEHIND THE BUBBLES

## Semi-permanent '05

SHOTS OF INSPIRATION (AND TEQUILA)

## I.T. phone home

VODAFONE'S FUTURISTIC FITOUT

## Nostalgia in design

IS THERE ANYTHING NEW?



"Design is a powerful tool. Take a chance and enjoy the ride." (Chuck Pelly)

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# Getting cut-through is not about being worthy or dull

It's cool green, not "grubby green", and it's got design written right through its centre. B\_E\_E's mixture of ruthlessly green specification and wry humour made a splash when it debuted on supermarket shelves a little over a year ago. Emily Simpson looks into "Beauty Engineered for Ever" and finds it's even more persuasive one year on. Photograph by Emma Bass.

It's pretty hard to write a story about Brigid Hardy and B\_E\_E that doesn't read like a big sycophantic advertisement. I'm not suggesting that I've been brain washed; but let's just say that if this detergent gig doesn't pan out, there's a career waiting for Hardy in motivational speaking. She fizzles with an enthusiasm for B\_E\_E that's made bearable (likable, even) by her intelligence and also because (here we go) her heart is undoubtedly in the right place. No I mean it; cleaning products, in their own subtle way, can change the world. Hardy believes it and, after an intense interview that runs to three hours, so do I.

If you're not aware of the cleaning products that sell by the name of B\_E\_E (it stands for "Beauty Engineered for Ever") you're probably subconsciously aware of the "talking bottles" they're packaged in. They're the ones with the come-hither labels. "I Like your Top", croons the surface cleaner; "I'll Make It All White", promises the fabric whitener. You know that stuff Kevin Roberts said about the world's greatest brands inspiring intimacy? He'd be all over B\_E\_E.

"We're up against the big guys," says Hardy, explaining the need for B\_E\_E to shout louder – or at least, more seductively – than any other bottle on the shelf. "People's mother's mothers bought Sunlight. Three hundred million dollars are spent on cleaning products in New Zealand every year

and it's essentially controlled by three large companies – most of which have been around since the industrial revolution. It's a really conservative category. People just don't give it the mind space. That three hundred million could be better spent..."

But first you've got to change the habits passed down through all those mothers (okay and fathers, whatever). You have to cut through the dull fog that descends on the soul of the average shopper as they wheel their trolley down the supermarket's least inspiring aisle. Not only do your labels have to be wittier and your bottles more easily recycled, but your products must be more bio-degradable, they must work better, smell nicer, leave your hands softer...

## DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

Ticking all those boxes is a job for an endlessly driven and dedicated perfectionist. Someone with a head for business as well as the balls to take on the international giants (Unilever and Procter & Gamble), not to mention an environmental conscience and an uncanny instinct for self promotion.

Contacts in high places don't hurt either (Stephen Tindall was B\_E\_E's seed investor) and, most of all, you need to be able to convince people that eco-friendly cleaning products aren't a worthy but dull affair at all – they're actually glamorous, quirky, sensual and fun. In other words, to do this job,

you have to be Brigid Hardy. "Green is the new black," she's been quoted as saying. And it seems that glamorous pink – with no hint of leaping dolphin – is the new green.

Hardy was raised in the Hawke's Bay – her father was a lawyer, her mother a drama teacher – and she attended posh Woodford House school before spending her seventh form year as an exchange student in Germany (she became fluent in the language). Otago University was her next stop – she graduated with first class honours in law with an English literature degree on the side and then worked for 18 months helping to reform domestic violence legislation. She then travelled on a scholarship to Harvard University (which is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by the way) where she completed her masters in law. It was a long way from provincial New Zealand but Hardy loved it.

"It sounds geeky but I just adored the study – our professors were the most interesting, charismatic, intelligent, exceptional human beings." And sharing classes with America's elite can do surprisingly positive things for a girl's sense of self. "It was quite a rarefied environment – I felt like the only one whose parents weren't loaded or diplomats or something but I also felt like I was this incredibly down-to-earth, grounded, well-balanced person," recalls Hardy. "These people had had so much

pressure on them from year dot and meanwhile, back in Havelock North, people didn't know where Harvard was. You see how simple New Zealand is and you begin to really enjoy the possibilities that it has to offer..."

"I was in the US at the time of the OJ Simpson trial – you felt that you and your friends might feel one way but there was nothing you could do about it. Whereas [working on the domestic violence law reform in New Zealand] I'd got the feeling that a few people could make a difference and, guess what, we changed the nation..."

## RIPE AND RETURNING TO THE HUB

Hardy returned to New Zealand and did a stint as the legal private secretary to then Minister of Justice Sir Douglas Graham. It was where she likes to be – at the hub of the action. But when Sir Douglas retired it was time to move on and so Hardy approached McKinsey & Company, the prestigious international management consultancy firm that is known for snaffling up the cream of Harvard graduates. They'd approached Hardy years earlier but back then she had other plans.

Now she was ripe and ready for the intense demands a position with McKinsey promises – the company has a reputation for long hours and hard yakka in an old-school, suity office environment. It seems the other end of the spectrum from what Hardy would

later strive to cultivate with B\_E\_E. But McKinsey could offer her insights that can't be gleaned from universities or from a job in government or the legal system. She had the ideas and the energy in place – but, she explains, she needed a taste of big business.

“You don't have to have a business background [to join McKinsey] and I didn't. Initially you go to these hard-core strategy boot camps with international experts. People say it's like drinking from a fire hydrant – and then your job is to go and give clients a shot in the arm of smarts and insight.

“I did quite a bit of 'business building' work,” says Hardy, outlining philosophies that continue to shape her approach to B\_E\_E. “McKinsey is very big on oscillating between the big picture and really meticulously defined strategy. You've got the big dream, then you're very specifically and logically planning and then you go back up into the creative space,” she explains. “You get to the point where you have such a strong and detailed picture of your business that you really believe in it.”

While she picked up invaluable philosophies and contacts in the two and a half years she spent with McKinsey, it wasn't ultimately a natural fit for Hardy. She resigned and embraced the un-corporate side of herself with a tour of India, including a visit to a yoga school, where, she laughs, the tension in her back was treated like some sort of medical and spiritual emergency.

Back in New Zealand, it was time to find some sort of union between her hard-earned business savvy and her idealism. “I knew that I wanted to work in an area that had a bit of purpose and soul,” she says. “Business has all this efficiency, all these systems. I thought if you brought that together with passion and beliefs and goodwill you'd really have something...”

## WORLD CHANGING PROPOSITION

Perhaps not surprisingly the eco-friendly cleaning products idea was not Hardy's. It came from Stephen Tindall, who she'd met through her work at McKinsey. But once Hardy had given it some thought and managed to spark up her imagination, cleaning

products had their most principled and passionate advocate in history. Brigid Hardy doesn't puddle around. “It's businesses that change the world and we really want to change the world with this,” she says.

B\_E\_E is about more than profit in ways that are many and multi-layered. There is of course, the fact that the “green” quota of both the products and their packaging is tested according to ruthless standards. Not only do B\_E\_E maintain high standards themselves but they investigate the companies they interact with, and

the companies that those companies interact with. The detail involved in being truly green is staggering and many supposedly green practices (such as refill packs) aren't as effective as they might seem. “Refill packs aren't actually recyclable so we've opted to sell from bulk bins, which supermarkets won't stock, so we have to rely on our customers travelling to health food stores to restock,” says Hardy.

She is an ideas person, a communicator and concerned with the minutest detail but she admits that the highly-technical, scientific side of the job has been the most challenging. A key member of her team is Tony Morpeth who set up the manufacturing of the successful Lush brand in Australia and who manages the manufacturing of the B\_E\_E. “I'm the thinker and the strategist and he's the one who can kind of 'do stuff,’” says Hardy.

Brigid Hardy consistently stresses that B\_E\_E is a family – a team effort involving engineers, chemists, manufacturers, scientists, sustainability

experts a perfumer, advertising and PR geniuses... “The sorts of people who are normally not in the same room together.”

And integral to the process from the very beginning have been designers. Hardy brought in designworks at an early stage, as well as Simon Coley as a separate design management consultant (Coley was creative director of the Better by Design conference). Having recently returned from the UK at the time, he was well aware of the positive impact of design at the pre-launch stage of a business.

**“You have to cut through the dull fog that descends on the soul of the average shopper as they wheel their trolley down the supermarket's least inspiring isle. Not only do your labels have to be wittier and your bottles more easily recycled, but your products must be more bio-degradable, they must work better, smell nicer, and leave your hands softer...”**

“A lot of clients underestimate what it requires to do this sort of thing well. It takes expertise that marketing departments don't have... We had to disrupt the customer, to stop them in the supermarket because you are competing against Sunlight and all those brands that are tattooed into people's subconsciouses...”

“B\_E\_E is bold and design is right at the centre of the offering. You need to invest, not just in money, but in time. It's not something you do at the end, you start with it. Hardy recognised she needed to have this at the core of the brand.”

## COOL GREEN, NOT GRUBBY GREEN

The policy was to create a green product but not, as Hardy calls it, a “grubby green” one, because the perception in the market was that traditional eco products were less effective and required more elbow grease. Interestingly while our planet's crises could probably be measured in millennia terms, “green”, with its associations of hand-knitted jumpers

and ineffective deodorants, has been relegated to the 90s. Today's customer wants more than a clean conscience.

“What I would hope is that B\_E\_E would appeal to people even if it wasn't environmental,” she says. “You don't want the pity vote or the guilt vote. You don't want to make people feel obligated – this is a treat. We want people to buy it because it smells gorgeous and looks gorgeous and because they like it... This is about making people feel emotional and passionate about something they never felt emotional about before.”

Which you can't do from a sterile lab or a grey office. Just as Hardy broke the mold with B\_E\_E's label designs, she is unconventional in the way she runs her business. B\_E\_E operates from a villa in Freeman's Bay and the atmosphere is decidedly un-corporate. “This is almost the anti-business. It's the girl version,” she says. “You don't have to ask to leave early if it's your child's sports day. I'm doing an intensive yoga course this week so I'm not in until 9.30 – and I'm the manager! But I think it makes me a better manager.

“B\_E\_E is very much about relationships. We send a lot of personal cards and have semi-personal phone calls. It's like getting people to come to a fun party,” says Hardy.

Now, don't for a minute confuse all this fun and friendliness with slacking around. Hardy pushes herself to the limit with all things and her standards are notorious. “She drives her team to deliver,” says Coley. “She has very high expectations – which she has to have. She's competing against the biggest companies in the world.”

“Something I learned from Harvard,” says Hardy, “is that nothing is about luck, it's about channelled focus. There are a lot of people who have sweated blood over B\_E\_E. There have been tears shed over the shape of the corners of the labels...”

And while the aroma of essential oils, the stylish packaging, green guarantee and cheeky labels are all integral to B\_E\_E, the scrubbing power is the ultimate. “If a customer came back to us and said ‘these products don't work’ we'd take that so seriously the whole office would stop.”