

Visual identity is the company's well-chosen attire. Attire that sends signals and communicates. That emphasises the company's core values. Designers Martin Fredricson and Nikolaj Knop at WE RECOMMEND tell why it is so important for a company to have a well-planned visual identity.

I met Martin and Nikolaj at their office in Malmö to talk about identity and design. The office is in one of Malmö's port and industry areas.

An old maxim in the world of design is "form follows function" - to a large extent, function dictates form. But for WE RECOMMEND, form is equal to function. Form and design are to communicate the core values of WE RECOMMEND's principals. The difference compared to an advertising agency is that WE RECOMMEND works with the fundamental graphical pro-filing of companies.

Historically, many companies have striven to emphasise their merits with the aid of advertising. But it takes more than that today. Many products are not material things. Services, concepts and arrangements also need visual identities.

**What does the concept of "identity" mean to a company today?**

"It means a lot. Identity is a summation of everything the company does," says Martin.

"Visual identity is a translation in terms of form of their core values."

"The players in the market are more numerous today and the product is no longer the entire brand," says Nikolaj. "The values the consumer gets in the bargain have become more and more important."

**For the web company Fivestarday, you created different sets of the visual identity.**

**Does a company need variants of its identity for different contexts today?**

"There is an increased need," says Nikolaj. "Before, the company's visual look was uniform and set. Nowadays, it's not only the producer who decides over the product - the consumer has more influence. So a company may need variants of the identity depending on which forum it takes part and is seen in. And if our client has this need, we factor it into our work."

"For the client, to some extent it's a question of balance," says Martin. "How do we make the visual identity dynamic, flexible and vivid without it becoming too diffuse?"

At WE RECOMMEND, the core values Respect, Think, Create and Deliver permeate everything they do. For Martin and Nikolaj, it is a matter of respecting the client's business and experience. Of listening and reflecting on gathered impressions. And taking all of this into the part of the process where visual creation takes place.

“Respect, Think, Create and Deliver. These are solid, self-explanatory values. Design is hard work and we need to deliver on time and with quality. For us it has a lot to do with acting correctly,” says Nikolaj.

**Why should people engage you? What makes you different from other agencies in the same area?**

“Our core values. And our references. We have lengthy experience of design work for both larger and smaller clients,” says Martin. “Another advantage is that we are involved in the whole process, from the initial meetings and analysis with the client to the final delivery. Our clients appreciate the direct contact, the fact that there is no middle man.”

“We represent traditional craftsmanship and innovative design,” says Nikolaj. “Our solutions are based on thorough knowledge of and respect for the history of design and for traditional craftsmanship while the solutions are innovative and contemporary.”

“The name WE RECOMMEND is humble and a bit instructive,” says Nikolaj. “We recommend, nothing more and nothing less. It’s important that the clients don’t feel like they’re being forced but decide themselves to choose our suggestion, even though we sometimes can be challenging. The clients usually accept our suggestions, since we do a lot of the preliminary work together with them.

“And then we have the personal ambition - ‘this has to be different’ - that permeates much of what we do, including the design work.”

WE RECOMMEND’s core values are also reflected in their office, which is characterised by restraint. Martin tells that they wanted to create a workshop atmosphere in the office - there is plenty of room and free space. Previously there was a gold and precious metals factory in the premises. Martin and Nikolaj chose to keep the wall tiles from that period. And the light fixtures, with naked fluorescent tubes, still hang from the ceiling. The interior fixtures are carefully chosen and the room is sparingly furnished. They themselves have produced the black and white desks, where magazines and design literature lie next to the computer screens.

**When did you begin to become interested in design? What did you do before you started WE RECOMMEND?**

“My interest began already in comprehensive school,” says Nikolaj. “Then I studied at Denmark’s Design School for five years. I worked in design for a couple of years in Denmark. But I felt that I couldn’t develop any further - I wanted to work in a different way, get closer to the process, not complicate things, not get caught up in the politics that often surround certain projects. I wanted to have full control of the design process and the company. I wanted to try our own design philosophy and see if it worked.”

Martin studied digital design at Hyper Island, where he wrote his thesis on visual identity. He worked subsequently at a design agency in San Francisco and a few years in Copenhagen, where he worked with Nikolaj. But it was not until they had both quit the agency that they got together over the core values and decided to start WE RECOMMEND.

**What lessons have you brought from your time in Copenhagen?**

“That design is hard work. You can’t ignore any part of the design process,” says Martin.

“When I was working in Copenhagen, I often took responsibility for all of the parts, from project management to design. It was extremely educational,” says Nikolaj.

**What happens when a client contacts you for a commission?**

“It differs. Some clients understand and are knowledgeable about their brand; others need help to develop a strategy. But it’s a good thing if there is an internal plan for the company’s core values,” says Martin.

“Many of our clients already have a visual identity that we refine. But what is most interesting is of course to create a new identity from the ground up,” says Nikolaj.

**How do you chart the client’s core values?**

“The client’s core values are usually already charted and in that case we don’t try to find new ones,” says Martin.

“But if the core values are not charted, we use interviews and workshops. We need knowledge and we respect all input to the design process,” says Nikolaj.

**Your design process consists of the phases Research, Creative Base, Visual Base and Solution. How are the client’s core values transferred to the process? And how are they expressed in the final result?**

“We have a holistic perspective,” says Martin. “We can for example stick collected material on walls and create a special world for the job. You get ideas when you enter that world and surround yourself with the material.”

“In the creative phase, we add the core values and translate them into functional, interesting design,” says Nikolaj. “This is no wizard’s workshop where ideas pop up from nowhere. It’s hard, structured work that results in ideas during the creative and visual phases.”

The identity is the base, regardless of where the material will be used. Some material is analogue, other material digital. The client also receives training in the visual profile plus a design manual containing rules for the use of the material. Martin and Nikolaj feel that the clients should have high expectations on the result. WE RECOMMEND wants to be a part of creating pride among the employees in the visual identity.

We slip into matters of design in general. We talk about the creative process. About inspiration. About target groups. The craft, tradition and regeneration.

**How do you define the craft of designing? What is important to you?**

“There needs to be a unique point,” says Martin. “Good craftsmanship makes for durability. The craft includes knowledge of colour selection, logotypes based on images or text, type-faces, image style and illustration style.”

Martin and Nikolaj think a moment and then say that the time aspect for durability varies; it often has to do with changes in the organisation.

**When I see some of your work, such as Plan8 and Woodward, my gaze gets caught momentarily, but not so much as to bother me. Is this a goal in your design work?**

“It depends a lot on how the commission looks,” says Martin. “But as a company you have to dare to stand up for who you are and not hide behind style.”

“We try to get rid of anything unnecessary - that makes it easier to catch your gaze,” Nikolaj continues.

**How do you think regarding target groups for your design work? Is it important how the viewer perceives your design?**

“The design process begins inside the head of the client and ends up with the target group,” says Nikolaj. “We think highly of target groups - they can take a lot on board and we mustn’t be afraid to challenge.”

“Our customers sometimes have extensive knowledge of the target group, sometimes not. The target group can be ‘everyone’ and in that case we take that into consideration,” says Martin. “Design can be popular but still properly worked through.”

“We don’t just meet other designers,” says Nikolaj. “You need to have insight into all types of people. We don’t want to be a ‘gated design community’; we don’t want to design for other designers.”

**Is it possible for you to work with design that shows irony or is provocative?**

“When we worked with the artistic ‘OBS!’ project, we made a newspaper that to some extent may have been provocative. The whole artistic idea built on creating a commentary on the free newspapers in Copenhagen.”

Martin and Nikolaj are willing to take on any type of commission; it all depends on what the client wants to communicate through the design. Opinion can however be divided on what is provocative. The result of a design process can be a challenge without that being its main aim.

“It can be provocative in itself to subtract, that there isn’t anything extra,” says Nikolaj.

**Typefaces can become overused, they can come to symbolise something in particular, they are constantly re-evaluated. How do you think when you choose a typeface?**

“Is there a basis? Is the typeface properly drawn up? In that case there is often an innate quality. It’s important how you use the typeface, not just how it looks. It has to be functional. Expertise in the area is extensive and we don’t construct any typefaces ourselves,” says Martin. “You have to understand which values and emotions they evoke, which expression they communicate. They interact with other basic elements of the design and we must be able to balance the whole in the right way.”

**Do you feel that there exist clichés in the area of design? If so, how do you avoid clichés?**

“One of the biggest clichés is that the word design is often associated with something ‘pop’; this is used as a sales argument. But design doesn’t automatically mean quality; the concept of quality must constantly be discussed,” says Nikolaj.

“You have to keep updated on the area of design,” says Martin. “You have to be able to see our arguments for the result of the design, understand the solution.”

In order to stay updated, Martin and Nikolaj follow developments in design and society via the media. And it is important to live in a context. They teach and participate in examinations at Hyper Island in Stockholm and Karlskrona, at Denmark’s Design School and at HDK in Gothenburg - a good way to come in contact with the next generation of designers.

“We also try to look at things in different contexts. You have to dare to look for inspiration and discuss what you find. Why do I think that a certain debate programme on the telly is good, for example?”

**Finally: What is the big challenge for you?**

“Running WE RECOMMEND in accordance with our philosophy,” says Martin.

“And finding the unique way of communicating the customer’s core values,” says Nikolaj in conclusion.