

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

Family Unity



Design creates family look for new brand of electronic products.

When U.K.-based Virgin wanted to extend its powerful brand name into the North American market, the company joined forces with the giant retailer Target, which was looking for a way to draw a demographically younger breed of customer into its stores. The resultant idea was to develop a complete line of portable consumer electronic products that would be aimed primarily at the youth segment. The line would be sold exclusively at Target for a

specified period of time.

Virgin turned to ECCO Design, New York, to design the products, which would be sold under the brand name Virgin Pulse. The time frame for the project was tight. The plan demanded that 15 different products be simultaneously developed, and go from a concept presented in the boardroom to Target's shelves within 12 months. Products included a desktop CD/clock radio, personal CD player, portable televi-

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Color scheme, button design and button configuration are among the many design elements that help impart a unified look to the Virgin Pulse line of consumer electronics.

sion/DVD player combo, MP3 player, digital AM/FM stereo tuner and cordless phone with answering machine.

Since they would be sold together, the portable products had to possess a unifying theme in both appearance and functionality, a consistent design language that complemented an active youthful lifestyle while providing a clear link to the Virgin brand. Design objectives demanded that the products look “bold, vibrant and cool,” yet affordable, and they had to blend seamlessly into any environment—work, school, home, parties, the park, etc. Simple, user-friendly operation was a top priority.

Ideas for achieving the goal of “effortless functionality” included forms that could be easily held in the hand; removable hand straps; retractable handles; and selective use of a rubberized coating to provide a non-slip grip at places where the products would be grabbed. Intuitive operation was essential. The number of buttons are minimized and made large. Where possible, key control buttons are located around the device’s display, and the one likely

to be used most often is made the biggest.

The most obvious visual design element contributing to family unity is the color scheme — the matte-platinum plastic that is complemented by the grey rubberized coating on certain surfaces. Other visual elements include the brilliant-blue backlighting on LCD screens, commonality of the curves in the styling of the shapes, same style of buttons, and similar configurations of the buttons. For example, the largest button around an LCD appears on a lower corner as a teardrop shape.

The Virgin Pulse products are sold in red and silver packaging arranged on a special end-cap display. The products went on sale at Target before the last holiday season began and reportedly are selling very well. **AM**

—Richard J. Babyak

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