

FLEXIBLE BRANDING

Wayne Hunt will be one of the first to admit that designing a comprehensive graphics program for the emerging category of fast-casual dining is anything but fast or casual.

Now that the identity system is finished and business is under-way at several locations, the name Panda Panda may seem like a natural brand extension for the Panda Management Company. But the name was a tough sell for Hunt Design Associates, the Pasadena, Calif. firm that developed the identity for Panda Panda, one of the newest entries in the growing fast-casual restaurant category.

“Initially, even the best names might not seem very compelling without a strong visual reference,” says Wayne Hunt, principal of Hunt Design Associates. “Good names often become great because of the collective visual palette we associate with them.”

Panda Management Company had an established brand — a successful one — encompassing seven upscale Panda Inn restaurants and more than 275 Panda Express fast-food outlets throughout the West. When the management team, led by owners Andrew and Peggy Cherng, considered opening more sites, they also began to explore the idea of launching a new chain of fast-casual restaurants targeted primarily to people who want to serve wholesome meals at home but don’t have time to cook — a chain that could co-exist with their existing locations without draining customers away from them.

by Todd Hays





家庭套餐

TAKE-OUT

\$15 MEAL

- 2 PANDA ENTREES
- 1 STEAMED RICE*
- 1 CHOW MEIN
- CHOICE OF LARGE SOUP
- 4 FORTUNE COOKIES

\$20 MEAL

- 3 PANDA ENTREES
- 1 STEAMED RICE*
- 2 CHOW MEIN
- CHOICE OF LARGE SOUP
- 6 FORTUNE COOKIES

\$25 MEAL

- 4 PANDA ENTREES
- 2 STEAMED RICE*
- 2 CHOW MEIN
- 2 LARGE SOUPS
- 8 FORTUNE COOKIES

Add \$3.00 per Shrimp Entree, Won Ton Soup or Panda Panda Beef. Specialty Fried Rice or Chow Mein may be substituted as an entree. *Substitute Fried Rice or Chow Mein for \$1.00 each

Menu board listing various items such as PANDA PLATES, CHICKEN, BEEF, and SOUP. Includes prices and descriptions for different meal options.



VISUALIZING THE NAME

While the management team knew this new venture might get a lift by sharing some of the existing equity of the Panda brand, they also realized the chain would need to stand on its own and have its own unique identity. So they asked Hunt Design Associates to explore names that included the word *panda* as well as names that didn't.

To develop ideas, Hunt's designers began by generating lists of root words relating to restaurants, fast food, and Asia (including words Americans typically associate with Asian restaurants). This exploration was followed by gathering and generating Asian/Pacific imagery. By cross-associating the various words and visuals, a plethora of possible names began to emerge.

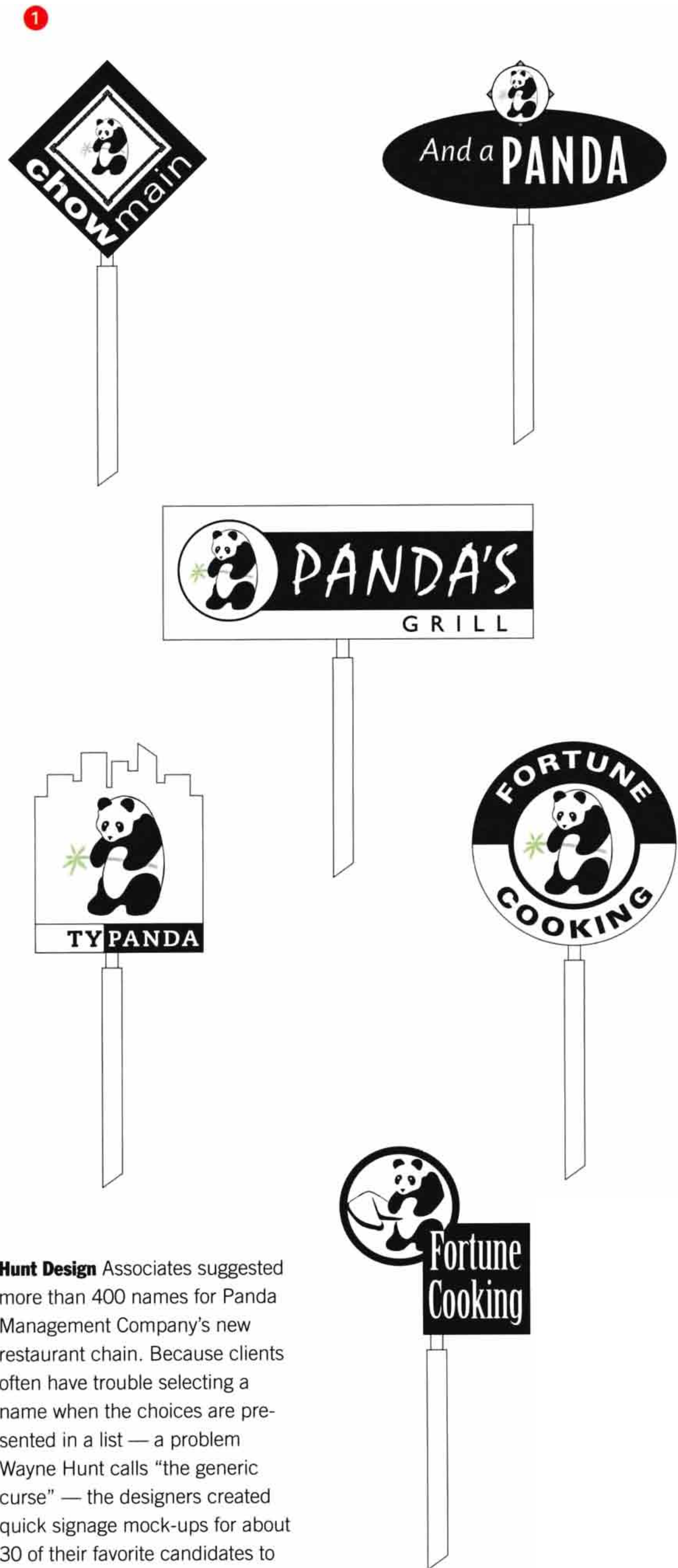
Hunt's team came up with more than 300 suggestions using the word *panda*. Then after some struggle — and after spending more time than it took to develop the panda ideas — they added more than 100 other names to the list. Although they showed the clients every name they had generated, the designers gave priority to about 30 candidates by developing some preliminary type and graphic treatments for them, and they created several quick comps for their favorite choice, Panda Panda.

"We tend to show our hero [the designers' preference] in a few different ways — with various fonts, colors, and visual cues," says Hunt, noting that this approach helps the client "see" the name as a functional solution and not just an abstract set of words.

"Sometimes you get a name that might be good, yet seems a bit off target," notes Mike Stack, a member of the Panda Management Company advisory board and the food-service consultant responsible for developing the fast-casual concept for the company. "You often need some graphics to help sell it."

In this case, the selling job took a lot of perseverance. "It took awhile for the name Panda Panda to grow on all of us on the management team," Stack says.

"If we know we're right, we stick to our guns and sell, sell, sell," says Hunt. "Not by forcing ideas, but rather by selling the reasons why the name is the right one." He knew Panda Panda was the best choice because of its inherent iconic



Hunt Design Associates suggested more than 400 names for Panda Management Company's new restaurant chain. Because clients often have trouble selecting a name when the choices are presented in a list — a problem Wayne Hunt calls "the generic curse" — the designers created quick signage mock-ups for about 30 of their favorite candidates to help the clients consider the choices in context.

2



In her early sketches, designer Christina Allen explored different treatments for the panda. The approach the client eventually chose was a new interpretation of the parent company's original logo.

strength. “Many of the best corporate names are visually self-pronouncing, like Shell Oil,” adds Hunt. “The Panda Panda name and graphics system work together or separately to create and reinforce a consummate visual icon. You look at the visual, you naturally say the company name — even without any word cues.”

BUILDING THE BRAND'S CHARACTER

Once the name was decided, the design team could focus on creating the visuals. In initial explorations, designer Christina Allen sketched pandas in a variety of styles, but the Hunt team narrowed her experiments down to two basic directions when they made their presentation to the client: playful, cartoonish pandas and sleek, stylized designs. Although the client preferred the more sophisticated approach, the final design was far from being settled.

“There were numerous issues,” Allen recalls. The clients expressed concern about the pandas’ weight and posture and debated whether or not they should smile. Even when the management team was satisfied with the graphic style, the logo’s composition inspired some anxiety: The designers presented what they thought was a final logo, with a pair of pandas turned back to back, but the clients worried that the arrangement looked unfriendly. So Hunt reworked the design and turned the pandas toward each other.

The designers took advantage of the iconography of the logo when they created the rest of the identity system. They left the Panda Panda name off many of the pieces — everything from paper cups and chopstick wrappers to the employees’ uniform shirts and name tags — and although they used the logo as the basis for all the collateral designs, they rearranged elements freely. “This job is better because we took these kinds of risks,” says Hunt.

“The final logo set the standard for the rest of the project,” notes designer Jennifer Bressler. “Once we started to explore just how far we could push the system and maintain a strong identity, we kept going.”

MAKING THE IDENTITY FLEXIBLE

With any chain, environmental graphics play a major role in branding. When they



➤ “The smiling panda was a favorite for a while,” says Allen. “It reflected a nice balance between the whimsical and the serious. We tried all sorts of smiles.” Eventually, however, the client decided pandas that didn’t smile looked more sophisticated.

➤ For the logo, the designers explored different compositions and color treatments. “We were rearranging pandas in every imaginable way,” Allen notes. They also experimented briefly with *Mistral*, a script typeface with an Asian flavor, but decided it was too limiting. “It comes down to the marketplace,” says Hunt. “Panda Panda is a restaurant for a mainly middle-class suburban audience. The customer does not need to be immersed in Chinese imagery to connect with it as a Chinese restaurant.”



➔ **The designers** created four-color, two-color, and black-and-white versions of the final logo. For the four-color design, they specified three PMS colors (186 red, 322 green, and 142 gold) plus black. The Panda Panda name was set in Kabel.



➔ **When they** created other elements in the identity system, the designers combined the bold logo colors with the more sophisticated palette they selected for the interior of the restaurant (green, rust, and purple).

➔ **For some** applications, such as employee uniform shirts and name tags, the Hunt team eliminated the restaurant name completely and let the graphics carry the brand identity.

developed exterior signs for Panda Panda, the Hunt team made flexibility one of their primary goals, creating vertical, horizontal, and square designs — with and without the restaurant's name — to be sure they could meet any city code and still maintain a distinctive identity. And to ensure motorists would be able to recognize each Panda Panda location, even when they were on the move, the design team chose a vivid palette for the outdoor signage and made colorful awnings a part of the branding system. "It's easy to build a street presence," Hunt says. "It's tougher to get a driver's attention."

For the restaurant's interior, the designers selected a more sophisticated palette — natural wood, accented with green, purple, and rust. They also developed a unique menu board to underscore the distinctive Panda Panda identity. "The menu boards are key sales tools for every fast-food restaurant chain," says Hunt. "We decided not to use [the typical] flat, back-lit menu boards."

Knowing he wanted to develop something different, Hunt actively explored menu board concepts. Interior design consultant Robert Merchant suggested an innovative approach — designing the menu boards as sweeping curved forms that seem to float in space. The Hunt team designed the boards in-house and had them constructed in wood with a metal face. Individual menu items were printed on 3M Scotchcal vinyl, then applied to a magnetic material, so they can be easily changed and rearranged.

"This never became just a graphics or interior design project," says Bressler. "It was always a cohesive, unified effort on the part of many designers." ■

TODD HAYS is a public relations consultant based in Pasadena, Calif. He frequently writes about the impact of design on business.

✦✦ **The flexibility** of the Panda Panda identity is particularly apparent in the diversity of the signage Hunt developed for different locations. As designer Jennifer Bressler notes, the brand "has all of the elements of a strong, fluid identity system — it can break apart into its component pieces and still work. The individual pieces are as strong as the whole."



✦ **Neither the** design team nor the client wanted to use the typical fast-food menu boards. So Hunt Design Associates developed a curved menu board, creating the model for the design in-house.

