



After studying Fashion at Middlesex University and graduating from the Royal College of Art with an MPhil, Janice Turner used her in-depth knowledge of the history of corporate uniform to develop niche design studio Field Grey Ltd, where she is creative director. The company designs uniforms as an expression of both the brand and wearer, and has provided consultancy and uniform solutions for clients such as the Land Registry, Vertu, The Boundary restaurant, Nude Skincare and Yotel.

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Once considered a necessary but tiresome expense, uniform design is now recognised as a significant opportunity within the branding portfolio. And although successful solutions require a research-based 'fit for purpose' approach and user-led design, there is absolutely no reason why the final output can't be creative, alluring and even enjoyable for brand and wearer.

Appearance matters. Psychologists estimate that a person takes an average of 30 seconds to form an opinion about another individual when meeting them for the first time. Of first impressions, 55% is based on what is visually apparent - clothes and body language; 38% on voice - tone, pitch, accent and fluency and only 7% on content. With this in mind, the role of the salesperson - often the first point of contact with a brand or retailer - is paramount. Besides issues of recruitment, training and product knowledge, the brand needs, crucially, to consider staff motivation. Employees who look good and feel comfortable and confident are far more effective communicators of positive product attributes - a great uniform can undoubtedly help to achieve this.

A brand's 'gestalt' now assembles and maintains a mix of values, both tangible and intangible, that are relevant to consumers. Our time-poor lifestyles respond to a blend of product knowledge backed by good service, which enables us to make the right decisions quickly and can transform necessary processes into great experiences. Uniform design is a key part of any service, and is a powerful - albeit often underdeveloped - tool in the branding box. Used effectively, it can go beyond the tangible benefits of safety, hygiene and positive identification and extend to promote, support and communicate the brand message.

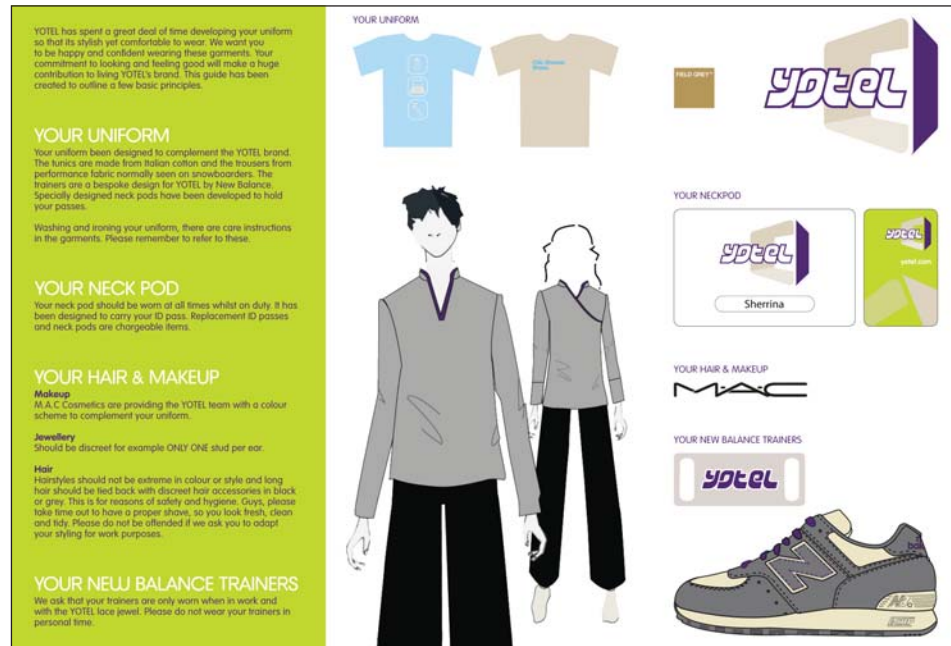
Despite all the positives, this niche area of design often stubbornly remains at the wrong end of the 'food chain' in the design and branding process. This idea is shared by designer Paul Costelloe, who created uniforms for airlines Aer Lingus and British Airways: "they [the colours] have generally been designed by someone in graphics developing their packaging; or if it's a bank you are given a cheque book to work from. They are not always thinking apparel, apparel comes way down the list, until it suddenly becomes very relevant".

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The process is not always simple. Large roll-outs of uniforms present logistical challenges, and every wearer is different. My interviews with Sainsbury's for an MPhil thesis found that it takes three years from brief to roll-out, followed by up to 12 months to physically distribute the garments to around 125,000 staff in 300 locations. In this case, the brand is at least largely UK based. Add the complication of a global roll-out, cultural differences in taste and sizing and customs clearance, and it is no wonder that the established uniform providers refer to themselves as service rather than design companies.

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The wearer needs to be top-of-mind during the design process. Fit for purpose is a critical mantra and wearers are quick to identify any flights of designer fancy that simply do not work in a practical sense. User-led design is an emerging and growing discipline and is certainly a necessary philosophy to create effective uniforms. A unisex approach is an important aspect of user-led design. Uniforms evolved from the era of a male-dominated workforce and are often overtly masculine. Rather than adapting a male uniform for a female wearer, a better approach is to work with both the male and female form in mind. Brands need to allow the design process to embrace a wearer's basic needs, and that certainly includes their gender.



Yotel style guide, neck pods and New Balance trainers

Leading designers have long been associated with uniform design, notably Hardy Amies and other fashion designers recruited to help the post-war effort. However, the utilitarian aesthetic necessitated by wartime shortages has been lost in the confusion between 'design-led' and 'designer label'. Recruiting a household name designer to front a uniform design does not guarantee an innovative solution. Younger designers with more cutting-edge credentials and who eschew predictable solutions are more likely to exploit the opportunities.

In April last year, fast food chain McDonald's unveiled its new Bruce Oldfield-designed uniform to a heavy serving of pastiche from fashion and food journalists alike. The brand's efforts to aim higher with a couturier-designed uniform was not utilitarian and broke category norms, generating a huge amount of interest. This premium feel was interpreted as a white-collar worker's uniform complete with scarves, suits, blouses and kick-flare hems. A member of staff observed that she felt like a businesswoman in it. At Field Grey, we feel that while the use of a couturier was surprising, provision of a well-designed uniform and the effort to motivate a workforce should be applauded.

Brand collaboration is an effective way to make uniforms less one-dimensional. For our work with Yotel - a hotel chain that combines the luxury of business class travel with the Japanese capsule concept - we sourced a number of complementary brands to partner, so that the design solution appeared modern and high tech, reflecting the confident outlook of the company, its staff and its fresh take on the hotel industry.

The result was bespoke trainers created by footwear brand New Balance - which featured a customised lace jewel - which quickly became a collector's item for trainer connoisseurs. 'Neck pods' inspired by the clean, white look of the iPod were developed for Yotel to hold name badges and BAA security passes. The rest of the uniform comprised tunics made from Italian cotton and trousers in a performance fabric normally specified for active sportswear, such as snowboarders' clothing.

The most successful uniform projects involve much thought and planning as to how the wearing of the uniform should be communicated to staff. Successful outcomes instil a sense of pride and personal ownership for the wearer. This is often achieved through a style guide that explains the uniform and its development in detail. Full-scale personal grooming sessions to launch the uniform to staff can also be useful, as they provide support and tips on how to wear hair and make-up to maximise the uniform's effect. For Yotel, again, we created a cohesive and fun guide that was designed to make wearers feel happy and confident, thereby inspiring them to embody the Yotel brand values. To launch the Yotel uniform, Field Grey used a senior MAC make-up artist to create a unique look for the staff. The artist then visited employees to customise the look for individual staff. Ideally, staff discounts would be negotiated to encourage ongoing application.



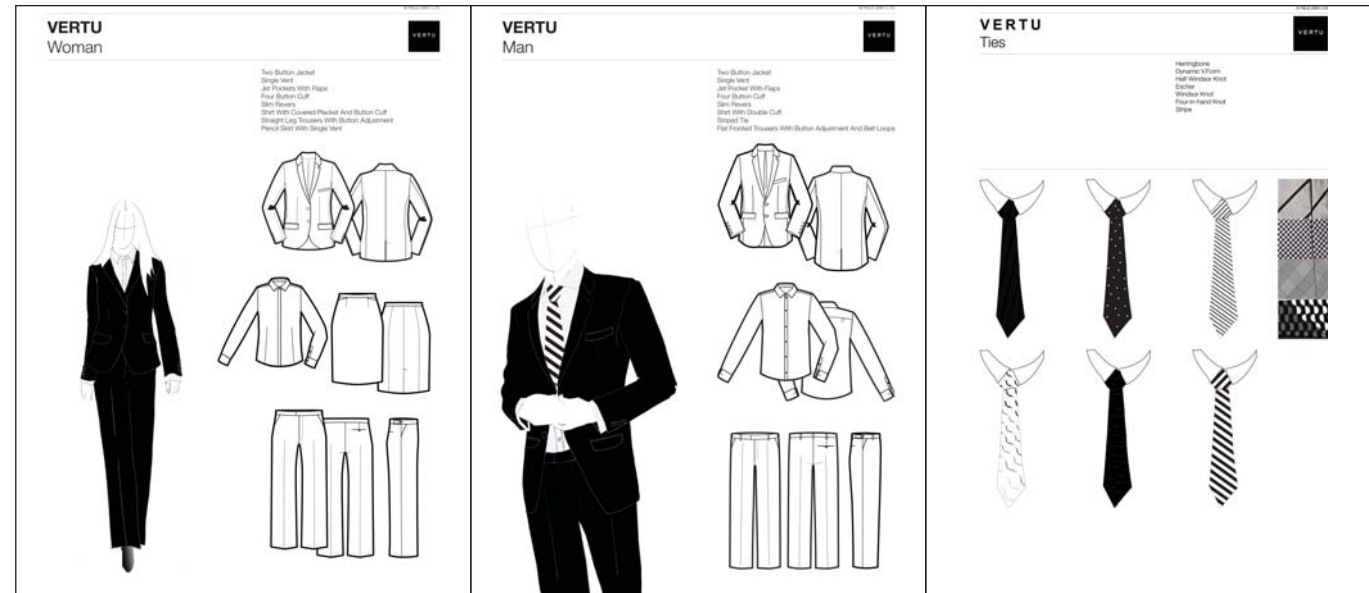
When designing a brand or retailer's uniform the company's ethics and business practices must be considered, so that the design solution reflects the client's core values. Take for example our work for Nude Skincare - a range of organic, ethical skincare products. The company believes in responsible business practices and uses natural ingredients, and called for an ethical uniform solution. The uniform consisted of a 100% organic grey cotton dress and fitted shirt, which complemented the product packaging. The cotton was manufactured in the UK, supporting local industry and reducing air miles. The dress came with two belts - a cummerbund and a sash - and the fitted shirt for male staff was paired with Katharine Hamnett golf trousers made from organic fabric. The uniform broke away from the tradition of lab coats and t-shirts at skincare counters, yet retains an aspirational and smart appearance. The brand is stocked in department stores in the UK and US.

For Field Grey's recent work with Nokia's luxury handset division Vertu, we focused on the subtle interpretation of the brand within the uniform design, and took a unisex approach to the task. The Vertu brand is a top-end offer. Handsets are presented as 'crown jewels' in a rarefied retail environment and the dominant colour palette of black, white and metallic emphasises discreet good taste - at a price. Brand ambassadors play a critical role when retailing such a technical luxury product, as few people have both time and money and the salesperson's ability to present as a personable contact who can explain product features is important to the buying decision.

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Uniform design solution for Nude Skincare



Uniform design solution for Vertu

The uniform's design solution evolved as a crisp white cotton shirt and simple dark tailored suit in very fine wool. Logo presence is limited to the suit buttons, which sport a discreet 'Vertu', and the man's silk tie. A reinforced internal pocket was incorporated into the suits to enable sales staff to carry a demonstration handset without ruining the line of their suits. Five staff members were involved in 'wearer trials' and fabrics were tested extensively prior to specification. To ensure the best possible fit, each Vertu store has appointed a 'uniform champion' to co-ordinate sizing quality control. The champions help staff to use a customised guide Field Grey has developed, to ensure individual measurements are accurate. With a potential 11 sizes (0 to 20) for women alone, all in short, regular or long, this is quite complex. Done well, it will result in a good fit from standard-sized garments.

A measured and subtle approach is necessary in many instances, as staff do not want to feel labelled when wearing a uniform away from the workplace. Overt and clumsy branding on uniforms can generate a poor self-image. In terms of discreet approaches, the interpretation of brand logos within textiles is an interesting avenue to explore. Logos can be incorporated as surface prints or worked into the weave of a fabric to great effect. Field Grey was commissioned by North Design to conduct a survey of workwear requirements for the Land Registry - a government department of around 8,000 people who maintain the Land Register of England property database - and develop three uniform styles: for security personnel, reception staff and surveyors.

The design solution was to take the new logo 'aerial' and break down the two-dimensional print application into a softer fabric interpretation, yet retain the concept and colours of the logo. The inspiration for the textile was taken from British textile designer Lucienne Day, and the silk scarf and tie were manufactured in Italy to achieve quality and depth of colour. These accessories have subsequently also been used as corporate gifts. Of course, besides the design, fabric quality also plays a critical role in successful, wearable solutions. In addition to their appearance when new, fabrics must be durable, hygienic and low maintenance.

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A discreet interpretation was a key requirement in our work for the Harmony flagship store - part of a chain of adult stores in the UK. We had a tight timescale of six weeks to create a new uniform for a total of 40 sales staff, male and female. The uniform incorporated light grey trousers from funky casualwear retailer Boxfresh, and long-sleeve and short-sleeve t-shirts - which were printed with the wallpaper graphics found in the store's interior and could be layered according to season. Field Grey also commissioned illustrator Richard Gray - who includes Alexander McQueen and Agent Provocateur among his clients - to illustrate a print for neck scarves to be worn by the female staff. The illustration spells out the word H.a.r.m.o.n.y in naughty ladies, which is a punchy but inoffensive pattern when produced at this scale.



Silk scarf for the Land Registry



Neck scarf for Harmony stores

In conclusion, we recommend that brands and retailers should be braver and more experimental when exploring the potential of uniform design. Uniforms are subjective and, importantly, need all parties on board at the start of the design process. True brand ambassadors also need to be given the opportunity to express themselves, so the idea of customisation will be a feature of future uniform research and development.

The future is blue for uniform design, in that blue-sky thinking has no limits. High-performance fabrics and wearable technology have the potential to turn us truly into urban nomads, wired for sound and images and constantly adjusting to optimise our physical environment. The evolving science of biomimetics aims to develop fabrics that mimic the behaviour of a living organism, thus changing shape, colour and texture. These fabrics have the potential to mediate the body's environment with external surroundings, both natural and man-made.

When linked with nanotechnology, such fabrics could offer the functionality of a handheld phone and email device, so a garment effectively performs as a BlackBerry or iPhone handset. The International Centre of Excellence for Wearable Electronics, major electronics companies such as Philips and the military are actively researching the holy grail of what will turn us into urban nomads: intelligent fabrics will be to garments what computer-assisted design has been to architecture. Just as unbelievable structures have the structural integrity to stay up, many uniformed jobs that involve nomadic working patterns require portable communications and physical protection. ■

