

Lightning in a Jar

For many adults, a firefly evokes memories of freedom and discovery—attributes that were, to Jeff Zwerner of Factor Design out of San Francisco, a perfect match for a cell phone for kids in the 8-to-12 age bracket. “The original identity established by the founder had very ‘Star Trek’-type typography, purple and green, very male, very aggressive,” he says of the concept that Firefly Mobile came to him with. “I said, ‘Why don’t you use a firefly?’” But when the client balked, citing the, well, *bugness* of its mascot, Zwerner persisted. “That’s the magic of a firefly. It doesn’t have to be rendered correctly, but how your imagination takes you.”

Firefly Mobile pioneered the cell phone made especially for tweens and how they live now, so there was no precedent about trying to sell such an object. “There was a lively debate about marketing phones to teens and younger [kids],” he says. “It’s an easy play to talk about the fear factor with parents, but we never went into why you need to be in touch. Our biggest challenge was how we could appeal to both kids and adults. This was smarter, and we gave people more credit as to why they needed this.”

To appeal to both generations, Firefly Mobile asked Zwerner to create a specific personality for the brand—and they thought big. “We created an entire brand language,” he says, “everything from the identity itself to the Web site, packaging and postcards. When [Firefly] launched the product, their objective was to partner with Target and with a major carrier, preferably Cingular.” The original photography, which Factor directed, features tweens leaping through the air among colorful bubbles—an image perfectly at home in a Target ad. It paid off. Six months after Firefly approached Factor, the phones were on the shelf at 1,400 Target stores, with Cingular as the carrier of choice for the fledgling brand.





Design firm: Factor Design
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Client: Firefly Mobile
Industry: Mobile Communications

But would it sell? Firefly's heart went out to potential partners before their phones even went to market. "We did an internal guidebook about how the company would grow," Zwerner says. "It talked about their core vision and values: 'Our philosophy is...! It was a very purposeful product interaction that showed how it can scale to other markets and offerings." With Target and Cingular in place, the next step was to win over the target market—and their wallet-wielding parents. "We had every intention of taking it to the consumer," Zwerner says, "but the challenge of the program was this bifocal marketing to parents and kids—to create an object of desire for the kids, and to get to the parents, who are the gatekeepers. We wanted to make them comfortable with that way of life, the technology, how it works."

How it works is unlike most tween "objects of desire"; for one thing, it has "a lot of security. No keypad—you can make calls only to numbers already in the phone's directory, which is a laborious process to get into," says Zwerner. "You can get calls from people already in the phone book—that's an option you can turn on and off—but there's no texting, no pictures [function]." This didn't stop the kids in the focus groups from convincing Mom and Dad to give the Firefly phone a chance. "We didn't need to pander to the kids, but we gave them the tools to say, 'I want this,' 'I need this,' 'You should feel comfortable that I'm talking only to certain people,'" Zwerner says. "In the focus groups, kids still wanted a full-feature cell phone, but when there were no adults in the room, it's pretty remarkable how they rationalized [this phone] and then parroted it back to adults in language Mom and Dad would understand. And the parents don't want to say no to their kids."

As coin-operated pay phones disappear from the landscape and even toddlers play with computers, Firefly's Factor-created slogan, "The Mobile Phone for Mobile Kids," respects the tweens' intelligence and, yes, freedom. "They're so adept these days," Zwerner says. "The equivalent to having a quarter is having a cell phone in their bag."

