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Delivering Success Through Design: Reinventing the Batting Helmet

by Dave Franchino

Sometimes collaboration is the key to a fresh and compelling approach to an old challenge.

Dave Franchino narrates how Design Concepts helped develop an innovative youth batting helmet that has a distinctive profile, is easily adjustable, provides the best possible protection, and looks cool. Re-entering the market in 2002, Wilson Sporting Goods sold 200,000 helmets the first year and, in three years, saw its category share grow from zero to an impressive 30 percent.



Dave Franchino, President, Design Concepts, Inc.

If you've played or watched Little League baseball over the past couple of decades, you're all too familiar with the bucket helmet. It was the oversized, generic plastic helmet that every batter was required to wear—the helmet that didn't seem to fit anyone quite right. Too big, too clumsy, it blocked kids' vision and slipped off their heads. And safety? Safety was a myth. It was obvious that the helmet offered little or no protection. Where style was concerned, the word *bucket* said it all. We've all worn it or watched someone else wear it. At Design Concepts, Inc., our challenge was to redesign it.

Our client, Wilson Sporting Goods, approached our design firm to bring new creativity and insights to the youth batting helmet. The Wilson team came armed with a tremendous passion for their products and a keen ability to forecast trends.

The times they are a-changing

Today, there's a helmet for almost everything. Hugo Martin of the *Los Angeles Times* calls our enthusiastic acceptance of protective headgear "the helmetization of America."¹ Now more

1. Hugo Martin, "Today, Helmets for All," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2005, p. 38.

than ever, consumers are willing to buy equipment to protect themselves and their children against injuries. With baseball and softball near the top of the injury list, that seems wise.

According to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, baseball is one of the five sports categories with the highest number of head injuries. And, as Martin points out, experts are stressing the need for good design in creating helmets that offer effective protection.

The days of kids grabbing a generic team helmet out of the ubiquitous equipment bag are coming to an end. Wilson Sporting Goods saw the movement in the marketplace toward families outfitting their own kids with safe, reliable products for both team and individual sports. From bike helmets to baseball bats, from soccer balls to hockey sticks, families were buying more and more of their kids' sports equipment. With this trend in mind, Wilson Sporting Goods executives saw the opportunity to design a new youth batting helmet.

The Wilson team defined style as the single most important element for entrance into the market. They theorized that design would be the most compelling factor for helmet sales. If it didn't look cool, kids wouldn't want it. It was time for the humble helmet to get a dramatic facelift.

Wilson's intuition proved to be spot on. More and more products and product categories that previously competed only on the basis of price, specifications, brand name, or distribution are finding themselves competing in completely new areas. Today, these products have to try to win at every stage of the user experience, which comprises the full range of customer emotions through the cycle of evaluation, acquisition, actual use, reflection, and eventual disposal.

Even manufacturers of such highly specialized products as medical devices find that their end users have grown accustomed to an array of choices and now demand exact attention to the customer experience. And a generation raised in the context of iPods, hip-hop, and MySpace can have excruciatingly sophisticated expectations for its safety products.

The desire to make a product look cool is, of course, nothing new. What is new, however, is applying *cool* to a dazzlingly broad range of

products previously considered too mundane or pedestrian to warrant this effort. And increasingly, companies that shepherd these "mundane" and "pedestrian" products are recognizing that attention to the user experience can be a powerful strategic weapon against their competition.

In the absence of other, more-quantifiable data, consumers—parents and children alike—will infer a host of other attributes based on the visual appearance of a product. Does it look modern and therefore state-of-the-art? Does it look safe? Does it look cool? Indeed, cool becomes the price of entry into many previously staid product lines.

While some companies find the increasingly relentless churn of style-sensitive products frustrating and long for the days of product-line stability, Wilson chose to embrace cool as an opportunity to create a meaningful strategic difference.

Great expectations

With this as the backdrop, Wilson Sporting Goods outlined three mandates for the new helmet: great look, great fit, and great performance.

In order to infuse new perspectives into their products—to see things from a different creative vantage point—Wilson Sporting Goods hired Design Concepts' industrial design team to raise the bar and develop concepts for an exceptional product.

The decision for a well-known brand to partner with consultants in the process of design innovation can be an emotional step for many companies, but in many aspects it represents a logical continuation of the trend toward multi-organizational, multi-country collaboration. Indeed, while not to downplay the upheaval outsourced, offshore manufacturing has created, most firms now realize that actively embracing strategic partnerships and specialized collaboration actually creates more opportunity, better execution, and consequently more corporate security. Extending this philosophy to partnerships with firms that can help with innovation may seem like ceding control of your core business, but Wilson, like many other progressive firms, sees it differently. An outside innovation firm can bring a fresh perspective to solving problems, combining internal experience and

market savvy with an external focus on trends, styles, manufacturing techniques, material advances, and so on. With this in mind, it becomes less a question of, “Should we partner with someone?” than of, “How can we leverage key partnerships more effectively than our competition does?”

Consequently, the firms that are the most successful are those best able to manage their strategic design partnerships—efficiently managing roles and responsibilities and combining the best capabilities of both organizations.

Understanding the playing field

The Design Concepts team began by doing contextual research on the product. A clear understanding of the basics of the youth baseball industry laid the foundation for creative work. Learning more about the current state of youth baseball also raised questions and challenges that the new design needed to address.

Great look

Baseball, of course, is America’s national pastime. It’s a sport steeped in tradition. Understanding this, our industrial designers wondered how far from tradition consumers were willing to stray. Would parents embrace a new look if it were radically different from the design they grew up wearing? Would kids respond to a helmet unlike those they see worn by professional players?

The challenges were many. The new product would need to meet a lengthy list of requirements—the first of which was that the helmet needed to be something kids would actually wear, something they would want to own. Design Concepts and Wilson Sporting Goods agreed: Design was essential in connecting with both kids and parents.

Donald Norman, author of *Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Things*, speaks to the idea of compelling design—design that strikes an emotional chord, design that motivates, connects, and generates product loyalty and success. In his book, Norman asks, “Can beauty and brains, pleasure and usability, go hand in hand?” That was the challenge for our designers.

And how do kids define *cool*?

Wilson and the Design Concepts team of researchers and designers watched and inter-

viewed kids playing baseball and softball to find out how they wore the helmets and what they wanted in a better design. After creating nearly 100 initial concept ideas, the team went back to the players armed with sketches and ready to learn more about what kids and parents needed in a new helmet. In fact, Wilson and Design Concepts went back to youth baseball games throughout the process to watch, listen, and gain valuable feedback clarifying everyone’s comfort level with a break from tradition.

To add one more challenge to the design picture, the opinions and ideas of both boys and girls needed to be equally understood and represented. With boys and girls playing team sports, the styling needed to be compelling to baseball-loving kids regardless of gender.

In the end, our research confirmed what we knew. Kids want to wear what’s in, what’s cool. And change? Kids were more than ready for a change in style. They wanted something different, something exciting. Kids get it: Change is good.

Great fit

Wilson’s expectation of a great fit was based on the idea that the helmet should fit every child well. In the past, helmet designs relied on compressed foam, which gave a loose fit or one that was much too tight. The new helmet needed to be truly adjustable to accommodate a good fit for every child — the elusive dream of one-size-fits-most.

In addition to tremendous conceptual challenges, the idea posed ergonomic issues. The helmet needed to be one general size and shape, but fit children of every shape and size. The element used to adjust the size needed to be easy to use and easy to reach from the perspective of a child wearing and adjusting the helmet. It also needed to be adjustable by a parent or coach who might adjust the helmet while standing behind the child.

The helmet also needed to provide a comfortable fit that would get the child through this season and beyond. It needed to grow with the quickly changing sizes of young kids. The possibility that it could be worn for several seasons, possibly even worn by another child in the family, was even more attractive. Adjustability was a key factor for teams, as well, offering the opportunity for the helmet to be shared among players

as needed. One-size adjustability was, however important, a lofty goal.

To solve several of these challenges, the helmet was designed with a simple adjustment feature—a velcro strap. Located on the back of the helmet, the strap was connected by cords to dual density foam padding inside the helmet. The strap was located at the back of the helmet to ensure that it would be worn securely and comfortably for the optimum fit and would be accessible for either an adult helping a child or a child putting on his/her own helmet. In addition, the location of the velcro strap made certain that the adjustment feature would not interfere with the way in which the ball might deflect off the helmet.

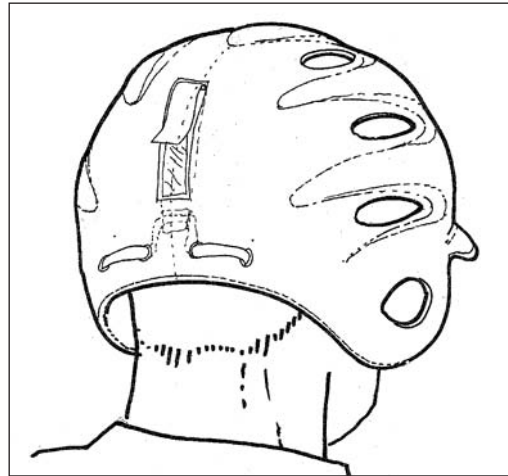
Great performance

While kids choose helmets based on design and style, parents use other criteria. Parents, who make the final purchasing decision, buy sporting goods products for their children based on safety and reliability, not to mention price. These factors were essential considerations when designing for the performance of the helmet.

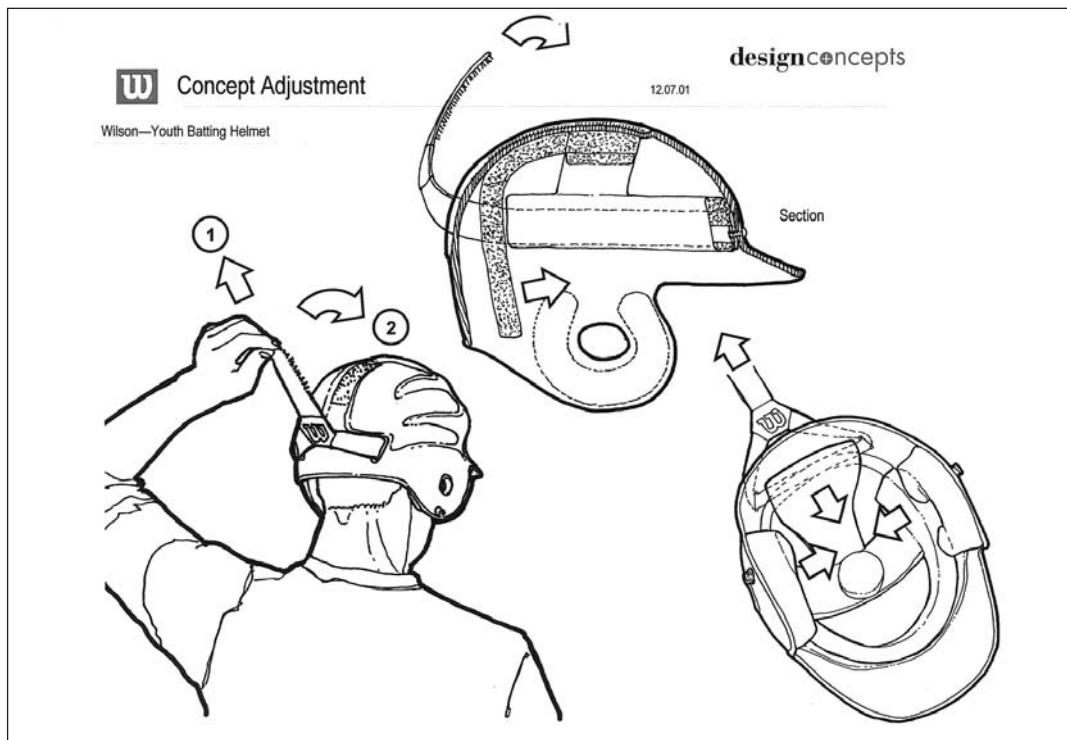
To meet the need for a great fit, and thereby superior performance, the padding in the helmet was made of thick, comfortable foam. The light-weight foam absorbs energy and impact better

than previous helmet designs and allows for a comfortable fit.

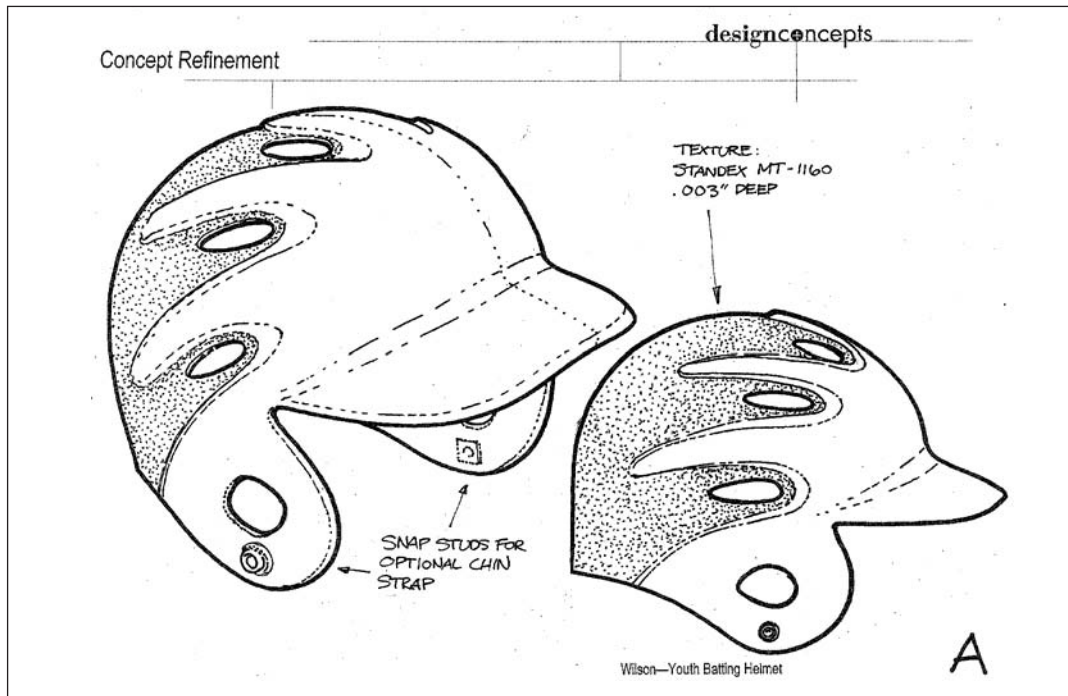
In the past, poorly fitting helmets could not provide maximum protection because they weren't used effectively and weren't fitting properly. The new helmet's easy-to-use adjustability feature made for a better fit that could provide greater protection. A more comfortable and effective fit combined with a greater sense of style improved the likelihood that the helmet would be worn correctly—the most important safety consideration.



Concept sketches of the back of the Wilson helmet.



Refined concept sketches of the adjustability feature of the youth batting helmet. Photo: Wilson Sporting Goods



Refined concept sketches of the front and side profile of the helmet.

Wilson Sporting Goods and its manufacturer ensured that the new helmet met the rigorous National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE) standards for safety.

Guerrilla marketing

The final design submitted to Wilson Sporting Goods brought it all together, giving texture, color, and a modern, clean style to the helmet. The novel design was granted five patents. The product launched in 2002 with 10 rich and saturated color choices. Geometrically shaped perforations and vents, smooth and rough textured surfaces, and sturdy visors added to the helmet's sleek and attractive appearance.

Wilson went for dramatically high exposure, using marketing strategies designed for tremendous visibility to a national and international audience. To aggressively re-enter the market (from which they had been absent for roughly six years), they positioned themselves to make a huge splash in a huge pond.

The company offered to outfit each of the 20 kids on any of the 16 teams participating in the 2003 Little League World Series. Fifteen of the teams—meaning 300 players—wore the helmet during the Series. Broadcast on ESPN, with the finals televised nationally on the ABC net-

work, the helmet caught the attention of kids and parents across the country. Monday morning after the first broadcast featuring kids wearing the helmet, Wilson's corporate headquarters received nearly 250 phone calls asking where the helmet could be purchased. As forecasted, the strong sense of design and the dramatic departure from the traditional bucket helmet appealed to kids' sense of style. The informal verdict was in: It was cool.

If you build it, they will come

With product placement encouraging interest, and strong distribution channels at retailers, from big box to mom and pop, securely in place, Wilson was effectively poised to re-enter the marketplace. The company conservatively projected sales of the new helmet to reach a respectable 10,000 units within the first year. Remarkably, actual sales reached a staggering 200,000 units in the helmet's first year on the shelf. Within three years of re-entering the youth batting helmet market, the company's market share rose from 0 to 30 percent, selling approximately 750,000 helmets.

Today, youth batting helmets have grown to be the third-largest selling category in the baseball division of Wilson Sporting Goods. More than 100 color combinations have been added to the line, continuing to make the helmet exciting



Young baseball player wearing the Wilson youth batting helmet designed by Design Concepts, Inc. Photo: Wilson Sporting Goods



The Wilson youth batting helmet in action. Photo: Wilson Sporting Goods

to kids. Indeed, many new helmet products have been introduced, including a college helmet, a women's fast-pitch helmet, a catcher's helmet, and even a next-generation youth batting helmet. As of 2006, the entire batting helmet segment—80 percent of which is designed for kids—has grown to a \$30-to-\$40 million market.

The success of the helmet sparked interest from retailers and consumers in other Wilson products and brought increased attention to the company's entire line of sporting goods. The company can now boast of its ability to outfit a player from head to toe. Most important, the reputation of the company for producing cutting-edge products with a contemporary, trend-setting style has been etched in the minds of consumers.

Conclusion

By identifying design as a key differentiating business strategy, Wilson Sporting Goods committed itself and Design Concepts to infuse innovative thinking into every aspect of the helmet. With several design challenges, but few corporate constraints, Wilson utilized the full power of design. As Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management, asserts in *BusinessWeek Online*, "To get the full benefit of design, companies have to embed design into—not append it onto—their business."² Wilson fully committed

2. Roger L. Martin, "Creativity that Goes Deep," *BusinessWeek Online*, August 3, 2005.

to embedding creativity into this product.

The success of the youth batting helmet underscores the importance of design as a critical, differentiating business strategy. Wilson Sporting Goods' ability to embrace this important factor and combine it with consumer trend forecasting led to true market leadership. Wilson has retooled its philosophy toward innovation, and design is now a key factor in the development of new products. In the words of a company executive, design is the "driving force" behind new product development and in the invigoration of the existing product lines. In light of the youth batting helmet's success, design now influences strategic decisions from the outset of the process rather than serving as icing on the cake in the final stages of development.

Suggested Readings

Martin, Roger L. "Designing Decisions," an interview with Doug Look for *Perspectives*, Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design, May 17, 2006.

Norman, Donald A. *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

US Consumer Product Safety Commission, "Gear Up, Strap It On—Helmets Can Save Lives and Reduce Injuries." March 29, 2006. ■

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