

A dark wine bottle is centered against a deep red background. The bottle has a blue and white label that reads "HELLO my name is".

# What your label says about the wine

by Skye Hallberg and Ron Woloshun

Designing a new label for Fred Scherrer is no easy task. He is a very particular man. At Scherrer Winery (Sebastopol, CA), he fine tunes the bottling machines himself; has four people on the sorting table at harvest when two would probably do perfectly; he conducts multiple blending trials on press fractions during day-long pressing; and he produces some of the best wines in California using his “I pay attention to every detail” style.

Early in 2006, I was at Scherrer Winery picking up a case of wine that a mutual friend had left for me when I pulled Scherrer aside. “Fred,” I began, breathing in a big gulp of air, “your wines are sumptuous, but they don’t taste quite as good as they could.” He paused and looked down at me (it’s a long way down — Fred is 6’2”), waiting for my critique. “Your label makes your wine taste just a tad ... uh ... generic.”

“Hmm, people like this label,” replied Scherrer. “Besides, what does my label have to do with how the wine actually tastes?”

This is the story about why and how we changed the Scherrer wine label. It's also a story about how to create or change your label, so your wine tastes better to people. Yes, you read that right: You can make your wine taste better without touching what's inside at all.

Here's the process:

1. Find out what your current label really says to your customers.
2. Decide what you want your label to say about your wine.
3. Hire professional designers and give them direction.
4. Pick the label design that best delivers against the direction you set.
5. Print your new label.

In a nutshell, it's quite simple. Think of your label as an advertisement for what is inside the bottle. After all, people can only judge a wine by its cover ... no quick sampling of its contents is allowed before purchase.

Before you design anything ...

### 1. Understand the Problem

Know what your current label is saying about your wine. Few people understand exactly what their label communicates to consumers — the good, the bad, and the — oops — unintended.

Wine packaging gives cues to buyers about what to expect inside; signals that come from the bottle shape and color, capsule or closure, and perhaps most important, from the label. You'd like to think that you are in control of these "cues," but the reality is people infer messages from your packaging that you never expected.

What does your label say? Does it say: this is a homemade wine? That it's made by a corporation? An amateur? Will people think it's for boomers or millennials? Does the label suggest "heavy and peppery" when the wine is refreshing and fruity? Does it say the wine is sweet? Dry? A special occasion wine? Or something you'd take to a barbecue?

In a category where the packaging forms are pretty standard (three primary bottle shapes, mostly 750 ml sizes) and have been in use for the past 200+ years, things that seem like small variables (typeface, paper stock, kerning, shadowing, icons, spacing, alignment) can have a big impact.

Here's a test you can try yourself: Put your labeled bottle on a shelf among some dozen or so other comparable wines. Gather a handful of people typical of those who buy your wine (you're looking for first impressions — no use stacking the deck with loyal customers and in-laws).

Instead of asking them to pick out the best label, ask them to pick out the best wine. The most expensive one. The picnic wine. The wine they'd bring to their boss's house. The wine they think wine critics like best. The wine their beer-drinking cousin would buy.

Consumers may not be able to recognize exactly why they're getting these impressions, but a good designer can — and can explain it to you in simple, jargon-free English.

We put the Scherrer label through this test, and results confirmed our suspicions. While beautifully printed with gold foil and great attention to detail, people interpreted the message as, "This is a generic wine ... most like a private label wine from CostPlus or Safeway."

We quickly sensed a problem in the label's hierarchy of information — a big red flag. The grape variety had more graphic emphasis than the winery name, which among American wines and food products, places it closer to a store brand than a fine upscale brand. This message mix-up lowered not only the perceived value of the wine, but also its perceived quality.

Consumer logic goes something like this: If it looks like a private label, it must be a little cheaper, and if it's cheaper, it can't be as good as a more expensive wine.

### 2. Strategy

Know what you want to say about the wine inside the bottle. Ask yourself, "What does someone need to know about my wine to make the decision to buy it?" Is it meant for a wine connoisseur? The collector? The adventurous wine lover who's always in search of a great find? Or for the "I'm just looking for a host-gift that won't embarrass me in front of my wine-snob friends" buyer? In what context will people see your wine or select it?

**a. Main Message:** When you think you've selected the main message you want your label to convey, ask: "Is this really what people want to know when they're choosing a wine?"

All too often winemakers begin a label design project by uttering that age-old, painfully obvious direction to their design team: "I want a wine label that I'll really like." What you like and what consumers will respond to is rarely the same.

Wine as hero, not label as hero. Scherrer wanted the label to support the wine quality, not to star in the show. That was music to our ears — because, all too often, wine labels are driven by design for its own sake, and not by the wine. When that happens, what you end up with is a fashion accessory. It's the difference between selling your wine and selling a four-inch square piece of artwork that happens to come attached to a free bottle of wine.

People are buying a bottle of wine, so it's the job of the label to enhance the sale of the wine itself. Before taking another step, we prepared package design objectives that read: "The label should increase the perceived value of Scherrer wines by reflecting the character and quality of the wine inside the bottle." This served as a guidepost for the entire redesign.

**b. Tone: Pick your wine's personality before the design starts.** This is often the hard part for most wine professionals. Do you want your wines to be seen as



Fred Scherrer with the old label (left), new label (right), and new shipper.

proud, loud, and glitzy? Soft, sensuous, and sexy? How do you know? There are ways of deciding on the “right” tone, and different designers use different techniques. Here’s one that works for us.

We set a pile of 80+ cards in front of Scherrer, each one printed with a different product attribute, brand character, or value term. Then we asked him to help pick the tone and character he wanted to convey.

Modify it, evolve it, renew it. But do not kid yourself. In a category with thousands of competitors, be realistic about whether or not buyers really use it to “recognize” your label, be it at a store or across a restaurant aisle.

There are ways to deconstruct a current label to identify what’s really valuable equity and what’s just taking up label

space, all of which your design team should know. He finished this exercise with three piles in front of him: a stack of cards containing words that he felt were true of his wines, a stack that he felt did not match up with his wines at all, and a whole bunch that made didn’t make it into either pile. We took the “yes” pile and asked “Cut it down to three words, please.” We took the “no” pile and asked the same thing.

**c. Brand Equity and Technical Requirements: Know what equities are worth keeping.** Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Just about the biggest mistake you can make is to start from scratch when you should not.

If people really know you as “the wine with the armadillo on it,” keep the icon. If you know they’re looking for your purple label, don’t change it to green. Do not listen to designers who can’t work within those constraints.

space, all of which your design team should know.

In the case of the Scherrer label, there were many discussions regarding the name badge. No doubt some loyal Scherrer customers had grown used to looking for the burgundy or black box, so it was arguably an equity; but its strongly bounded, heavy presence was tonally dissonant with Scherrer’s (decidedly not boxed-in) winemaking style. It presented tactical problems also. In the end, we all agreed that the name badge’s value was not as great as the value of accurately expressing the character of the wines.

**d. Write down your evaluation criteria.** There is no substitute for writing these down. After your first draft, take out the red pen and cross out all unnecessary words. You’ll know which ones to cross out by how familiar they are. A design criterion of “traditional” will be much more useful to you than the vague “quality.”

If your design objectives sound like “the purpose of the label is to convey that the wine inside is delicious, wonderful, high quality, warm, passionate, approachable, flavorful, pleasant, a good value, and an award winner,” please start over. That’s not design criteria ... it’s a laundry list.

### 3. Hire a Professional – and Brief Them Well

Your son-in-law may have the latest Photoshop software, and your niece may be quite the artist, but take our advice and don’t do it. It’s bad for family dynamics, and it’s even worse for the label.

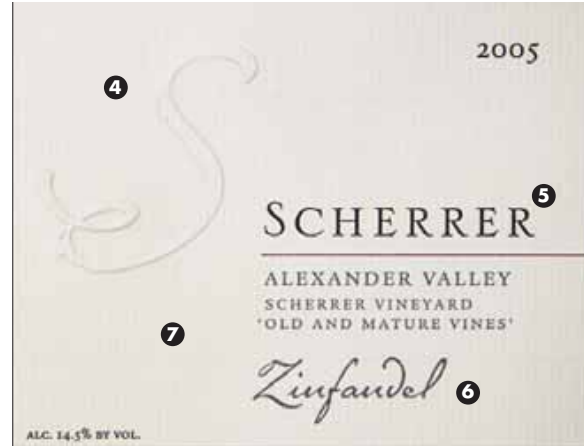
There are many trained graphic designers out there who want your business. There are lots of art directors and graphic designers who have experience designing wine labels. Some of them are even affordable. Choose someone you respect, who will listen, listen, and listen to you. Ask them to discuss a competitor’s wine label or two.

Ask them to discuss your label in detail. Make sure they can tell you not just

## Anatomy of a Label Redesign



1. **Varietal**, not brand, dominates the label; script font is fussy and mannered
2. **Decorative border** reduces valuable messaging area without adding significant graphic interest or personality
3. **Nameplate** is heavy and blocky; gold foil text on burgundy background is hard to read



4. **Embossed S** adds texture and graphic interest, balances composition
5. **Letterspaced capitals** are stately and subtly imposing, while improving legibility
6. **Varietal** is subordinate to brand; new script feels more artisanal and handmade
7. **Asymmetrical composition** is striking and innovative; classic typography and careful placement of elements keep it from becoming cold or austere

whether a design works or not, but why — and in a way you can understand. Then, after you hire them, pay their bills on time — this keeps them happy, healthy, and working hard for your success.

If things cost a nickel or two more than you expected, go for it. As your biggest piece of advertising and the first contact point most people will have with your wine, your label is far more important than your tasting room furniture.

Our creative director, who designed the new Scherrer label, alerted Fred to one of the biggest visual problems with the existing label: the script typeface used for the words “Scherrer Winery.” Scripts have a long and august history, but knowing how and when (not) to use them is something even many designers have trouble with.

A script face is almost always a terrible choice for a logotype. Besides being

harder to read than Roman type, most simply don’t have enough visual personality to make a strong, interesting logo, especially for words with a highly repetitive character count like “Scherrer.” And those that do have a strong personality are too something — ornate, casual, cutesy, formal, or else unambiguously tied to a specific historical period, geographic area, or aesthetic movement.

In other words, they’re perfect for evoking an extremely narrow, specific response. But even if that’s the goal, choose carefully, because most of the time you’ll end up with “fancy” — when what you probably wanted was “elegant.” In this case, the script was a major tonal misstep, interfering with brand recognition and diminishing the perceived wine quality.

The solution was to “demote” the script typeface and use it only for the varietal (we chose an organic, hand-drawn face to communicate Scherrer’s artisanal wine quality), while rendering the Scherrer

name in carefully selected, painstakingly spaced capitals.

Because the human eye recognizes words by their shapes, and not by the individual letters within them, capitals slow the eye down, creating both emphasis and a sense of calm. The use of plainer “small caps” for the appellation, sub-appellation, and vineyard text extends the effect, resulting in a design that is dignified without being stiff or pompous,

Another issue was what’s known as “borrowed interest” — using an irrelevant image or visual theme because it’s aesthetically pleasing or “cool.” (Even if you’ve never heard of it, you’ve seen it: think any “critter” or “car” wine, for a start.) Fred’s borrowed interest was much less acute than most. A common fleur-de-lys typographic ornament appearing on the label and capsule took up space and was removed.

After exploring dozens of alternate ornaments and icons, one solution rose to the top — a custom-calligraphed cursive S that is unique and idiosyncratic, but also steeped in tradition, much like Scherrer's winemaking.

#### 4. Judging Designs

Pick the design that best addresses the design objectives, not the one you believe is prettiest. The design you like best, or the most unusual design, or even the design that wins an award is not necessarily the best design for your label.

Design is very different from art — it's a mode of communication and, as such, should serve the product first and foremost. Therefore, keep your design objectives and evaluation criteria at hand when you review label designs. Ask your designer to read them aloud before every presentation. Evaluate every detail through the lens of how well it meets these criteria.

Then, ask yourself a few more questions: Does it look original? Or would the label be equally legitimate if you just swapped in another winery name?

#### 5. Print Your New Label Well

You wouldn't use low-quality grapes for your wine, so do not use a low-quality printer to print your labels. When choosing a printer, send a rough draft of the label artwork and ask them to point out anything that might be an issue on press.

Ask for samples of similar projects the printer has produced and a range of their other work. Never forget that the paper stock makes a difference. True, you can print anything on white, coated stock, including that ancient parchment texture you've fallen in love with; but the right paper choice can completely transform a design.

For the Scherrer label, our creative director worked with Spectrum Label Corp. (Hayward, CA), to find an uncoated, textured stock — a much better solution than hammering plain old white, coated

paper into a simulacrum of what we wanted to communicate.

Another rule of thumb: in wine labels, less actually is more. Years ago, metallic inks and foil hot-stamping were much more expensive than they are today, with the result that they served as an easy shorthand to add depth to a design and denote high quality. But now, they're so commonplace that it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between a wine bottle and a container for a mass-produced packaged food.

Foil stamping and metallic inks have become ubiquitous on corporate brands of wine, the \$8 fighting varietals in the chain store shelf-space wars. Just as four-color printing on white, coated paper often says "slick, corporate, mass-produced wine," metallics or foils risk coming across as frippery — again, fancy rather than elegant.

But, setting this process aside, changing the label doesn't actually change the way the wine tastes ... does it?

We asked 200 people in three cities to taste the same (unlabeled) white wine, poured from two different colored glass bottles — one a grassy green, the other a smoky gray. We never mentioned the bottles, asking people instead to describe the wine they were tasting (remember, it was the same wine in both bottles).

Two hundred comments later, one wine was overwhelmingly described as "grassy, fruity, bright, fresh" and the other as "complex, smoky, sophisticated, and mature." It hardly matters that one was overwhelmingly judged superior to the other; the real lesson is just how much packaging can and does alter our experience of a wine.

When a label sends the wrong messages, consumers are predisposed to notice "flaws" in the wine they don't even know they're looking for — no matter how enthusiastically the sommelier or wine seller might recommend a wine.

The new Scherrer label doesn't just look better, it sets higher expectations and prepares the taster for Fred Scherrer's complex, understated vintages. It allows sommeliers to recommend the wines, and wine merchants to stock them, more confidently — without having to reassure their patrons that despite appearances, the wine really is as good as they say.

Most important perhaps, the new label strengthens Scherrer Winery's position in an industry that becomes more challenging for small wineries every year. It commands a higher price-point by reflecting the exacting standards and tireless attention to detail that go into every bottle of Scherrer wine.

#### Conclusion

This kind of label design is not easy; it takes time, a lot of analysis, and thought. But by focusing on a consistent and deliberate visual message based on a carefully developed communication strategy, and by working with a designer or agency that knows how to translate that strategy into an original and meaningful design, you'll be amazed at what the right label can do for your wine.

In Fred Scherrer's words, "These guys were amazing. At every step, they made it clear that this project was not about design for its own sake — it was about the wines. Even my wife thinks our wines taste better now!"

#### About the Authors

Skylar Hallberg has an extensive background in brand management (Procter & Gamble), advertising (Young & Rubicam, BBDO), design and marketing consulting. She heads up Cogito's marketing department and grows old-vine Pinot Noir.

Cogito's Creative Director, Ron Woloshun, is an unreconstructed lover of typography, wine, and electronic gadgets. His deft touch with design, advertising, packaging, and identity development is widely recognized.

Cogito Creative Works can be reached at [www.CogitoCreative.com](http://www.CogitoCreative.com) and at 707/996-0920.