

Women to Watch: Christine Mau

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Each year the editors of Advertising Age select about 25 women from the marketing, advertising and media industries for their annual Women to Watch Special Report. This year's list includes K-C Brand Design Director Christine Mau who is recognized for bringing "radically new looks to very old categories." The story below originally appeared in the June 7, 2010, issue of Ad Age.

BATAVIA, Ohio (AdAge.com) – You might not expect the Neenah, Wis., offices of a maker of facial tissue, feminine-care products, diapers, paper towels and toilet paper to be a hotbed of design. But then, you'd be entirely wrong.

Whether it be the oval tissue carton, the more-recent wedge-shaped tissue boxes that look like slices of watermelon or other fruit, or U by Kotex packaging that feature a neon rainbow of pad and tampon wrappers ensconced in black boxes, Kimberly-Clark Corp. has been proving in serial fashion how possible it is to bring radically new looks to very old categories.

Christine Mau, 46, has been a big part of that. The brand design director for K-C's Family Care business is listed as inventor on two design patents and co-inventor on one process patent related to Kleenex's oval boxes.

She also led the effort on Kleenex's wedge boxes, which this year and last have created new summer merchandising opportunities alongside picnic supplies at Target and other design-savvy retailers at an otherwise slow time of year for the brand. And she also consulted on design for the U.S. launch of U by Kotex earlier this year.

Kleenex ovals, she said, have helped make the brand relevant to design-conscious Gen Y-ers, and the U by Kotex design aims to do something very similar for girls new or relatively new to the category.

"We found discretion to that consumer didn't mean white," she said. "It has a stigma of being this sanitary thing. The idea was to be right bold in your face. A hot pink or lime or orange is unapologetic. ... Yeah, girls menstruate. There it is."

Next in line for design interventions are toilet tissue and paper towels, and Ms. Mau's new responsibilities in family care have more global scope, too.

"It never occurred to me that these were boring products," she said. "I see everything as an opportunity. The longer that it's been left untouched, the more mundane it's been, to me that's just a bigger opportunity for impact through design."

It's a lot better of a job than trying to redesign the iPhone, she said. "They've already done such a tremendous job, you could only make little incremental moves there."

Design and ambition color Ms. Mau's life outside work, too. Her husband, an architect by training, is a woodworker who makes rocking chairs and benches.

"Her greatest strength is as a catalyst," said Dayton Henderson, K-C's design director. "She maintains a curiosity and perspective that's able to challenge conventions."