Beiersdorf

CHRONICLE 13

100 Years of a Design Icon

The Early Years in Blue and White

How NIVEA found its identity –

and how color made history

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1925, NIVEA Creme received the color scheme that still defines it today: the blue tin with white lettering. Today it is considered a classic, but at the time the step toward a modern, reduced, and strikingly different design was bold. The new look became the starting point of a brand identity that has endured across generations.

In this issue, we look back at the early years of this design, from 1925 to 1939 – a period in which not only the design took shape, but the world itself also underwent profound change. The late 1920s were marked by progress: more leisure, new ideals of beauty, and a growing awareness of the body. Yet political and economic conditions remained fragile. With the Great Depression from 1929 onward, uncertainty returned; from 1933, everyday life came increasingly under ideological influence.

How does a brand position itself in a time of rapid external change? How does it remain recognizable despite necessary adjustments? And what does NIVEA's design tell us about ideas of naturalness, health, and lifestyle in a politically charged era?

We explore these questions through images, archival materials, and historical context – and we show how closely the story of a simple tin is bound to the expectations, ideals, and upheavals of an entire society.

The “swimming tube” for which Beiersdorf held legal protection, was used for photo contests in German seaside resorts in the 1920s and proved extremely popular. The black-and-white photograph was later colorized using AI.

“The contents remain, of course, the same – since these cannot be improved.”

This was the line used in 1925 to introduce the new, now-iconic NIVEA design. Under the leadership of Beiersdorf’s advertising director, Juan Gregorio Clausen, the brand moved from a decorative Art Nouveau look to a modern, timeless appearance. Clausen deliberately chose colors that radiated clarity, freshness, and trust. The decision fundamentally changed how NIVEA presented itself – and it still defines the brand’s face today.

Advertising director Juan Gregorio Clausen had to choose. There were several options on the table. What might have happened had he opted for different colors?

The first blue-and-white NIVEA products, 1925

BACKGROUND

Juan Gregorio Clausen – the “captain” of the NIVEA brand

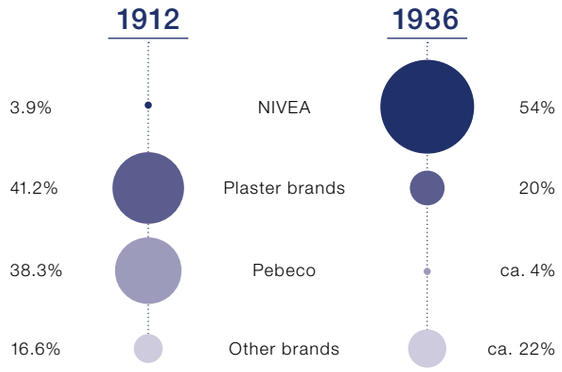
Juan Gregorio Clausen, born in 1890, served as a frigate captain in the Imperial Navy before joining Beiersdorf in 1920 as a career-changer. Although he had no experience in the branded-goods business, he advanced very quickly and took over as head of the advertising department. Clausen left a lasting mark on the NIVEA brand: under his direct responsibility, the iconic blue-and-white design was created, and it still makes NIVEA unmistakable today. With his creativity, he laid the foundation for NIVEA to become one of the world’s best-known skin care brands. The imaginative seaman shaped NIVEA advertising for 40 years before retiring in 1960. Clausen died in 1977 at the age of 87.

Juan Gregorio Clausen in 1935

Text: Thorsten Finke, Daniel Wallburg

>> When NIVEA Creme launched at the end of 1911, the brand’s visual identity was clearly aimed at a female audience. Yellow tins adorned with floral ornaments characterized the look of NIVEA Creme and of the first product range, which from 1912 also included powder, soap, and a hair-care product. Distribution of the new product range ran mainly through drugstores and pharmacies.

Initially, NIVEA contributed only modestly to Beiersdorf’s overall sales – in 1912, the share was 3.9 percent, rising thereafter. With the outbreak of the First World War, this development stalled. Raw-material shortages and the war economy severely restricted the young brand – poor conditions for a still-new cosmetic line. Even after the war’s end, brand building progressed only slowly. A fundamental realignment proved unavoidable, and a new design was slated to play a decisive, central role in rebuilding and positioning the brand.



The Blue Wonder

If Juan Gregorio Clausen had been a hunter, NIVEA’s tin might have turned green. But he was a man of the sea. Before entering business, Clausen had served for years as a frigate captain. This background shaped the decision to change the design that still defines NIVEA’s face today.

As head of advertising at Beiersdorf, Clausen changed the color of the cream tin in 1925: from yellow to blue. In retrospect, this stroke of genius laid the foundation for NIVEA’s global recognition. Clausen had assumed leadership of the advertising department in 1920, a time of bleak public mood: economic crisis, inflation, and the enduring consequences of war. The yellow Art Nouveau tin looked old-fashioned; it no longer suited a Weimar Republic characterized by youth culture, leisure, and sun-tanned skin.

Management even considered abandoning the NIVEA brand and marketing the products under “Pebeco,” then a successful Beiersdorf toothpaste. Clausen argued for the opposite: keep NIVEA – but reinvent its look. He prevailed.

His idea was a clear, modern design – and a new color. With his maritime background, Clausen knew the effect of blue: freshness, trust, and calm.

With the blue tin and its simple white lettering, NIVEA became a symbol of timeless care. The color itself turned into a trademark – so much so that even the smallest adjustments in later decades were made with great care.

One tin, one color, one recipe for success – thanks to a man who loved the sea and had an instinct for the right choice.

The NIVEA range in 1912

The Color Blue

That the blue design might prove successful could already be sensed in 1925 with a glance into the past: in the year of NIVEA's trademark registration, 1905, Pebeco – one of Beiersdorf's most successful branded goods of its time – came onto the market in a blue-and-white design. The toothpaste's success, which up to the First World War generated a large share of Beiersdorf's profits, also drew Clausen's focus to its design elements. It is reasonable to assume that Pebeco's blue design likewise influenced the design change of NIVEA Creme and of the entire range. As the first NIVEA product, NIVEA Soap had also adopted the Pebeco-like blue-and-white design when it was launched in 1906. With the launch of NIVEA Creme in 1911, however, its packaging used a yellow base color with floral ornaments, and by 1925 the color blue had largely disappeared from the NIVEA brand cosmos. One small exception was NIVEA Complexion Powder (1914–1925), which also already came in blue.

The inspiration? Pebeco toothpaste, from 1905

Already in blue back then: NIVEA Soap, 1906

From today's perspective, the switch from yellow with a floral pattern to blue for a product meant to address a predominantly female target group seems unusual. Yet our ideas about color and their gender-related connotations have changed over the decades. Until the beginning of the Second World War, blue had no clear assignment and was seen by some as clearly masculine, by others as clearly feminine. It was similar with the color pink. Only in the 1950s did the widespread perception take hold in Europe of blue as a "male" and pink as a "female" color.

The design of the first NIVEA tin from 1911 – alongside NIVEA Complexion Powder from 1914

And yet, with the design adjustment of 1925, NIVEA also became more attractive to a male audience. The first half of the 20th century shows the transition from functional body hygiene to a growing awareness of male grooming as an expression of modernity, social advancement, and individuality. This transition laid the basis for men's cosmetics as we know them today – between shaving soap, skin cream, and the expectation that men, too, may "make the best of themselves." The yellow packs with floral ornaments had not appealed to men. The new, pared-back look in blue and white, however, made NIVEA interesting for male buyers – and this was reflected in sales in the years that followed: In 1936, NIVEA products generated over 50 percent of total sales.

BACKGROUND

Blue is not simply Blue: NIVEA imitations of the 1930s

A clear sign of the new NIVEA design's success was the imitations that appeared with growing frequency from the early 1930s. They spread across many markets. Competitors across Europe deliberately exploited NIVEA's color palette and visual language to mislead consumers and create the impression they were purchasing the original product. One particularly striking example was the "Erika Creme" of 1931. Following an objection by Beiersdorf's legal department, the courts decided as follows: "In view of the astonishing similarity of the two presentations – which is not negated by the differing text, a deliberate imitation for the purpose of deceiving the purchasing public with competitive intent is established, as well as a violation of good morals."

Original and imitation, 1931

NIVEA — now appealing to men as well, 1927 advertisement

The new NIVEA brand design quickly conquered popular culture. From the mid-1930s onward, it even reached the silver screen as an advertising film. With the innovative "Gasparcolor" three-color process, it became possible for the first time to use glowing colors in short animated and art films, while feature films were still being produced in black and white. Elly Heuss-Knapp, later the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Germany, worked at that time for Beiersdorf as a copywriter and advertising specialist. She used this process for several NIVEA commercials that she brought to German cinemas from 1936. One of the best known – "White in Blue" – widely played with NIVEA's blue-and-white world of color and conveyed the cream's versatility in everyday life and leisure. The films were accompanied by specially composed melodies and songs, early forerunners of today's advertising jingle, which could be protected as distinctive sound trademarks too.

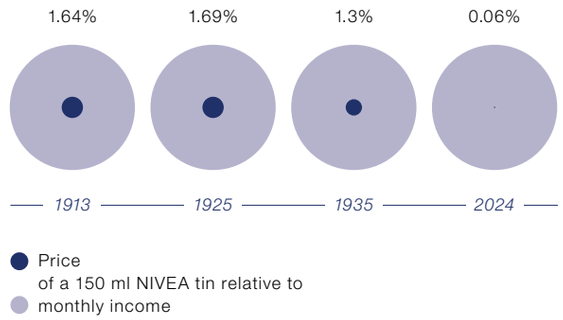
Advertisement – Germany, 1928

The 1920s in Germany were a time of new beginnings – above all in the cities. After the privations of the First World War and the hyperinflation that soon followed, many people longed for stability, modernity, and a new way of life. The Weimar Republic brought political uncertainty, but also cultural change and economic progress. Above all, the so-called Golden Twenties were shaped by urbanization, new leisure habits, a growing media landscape – and a changed view of the body. New rhythms shaped urban life, too.

In precisely this social climate the skin care brand NIVEA was able to establish itself. People no longer viewed skin care solely in the context of hygiene, but increasingly as an expression of self-care, health, and style. NIVEA Creme positioned itself early as a modern branded product that stood out for its clear design, reliable quality, and wide availability. Present in pharmacies, drugstores, and department stores, the cream became increasingly familiar, especially in urban households. Its appeal reached all ages.

Yet it was by no means a cheap everyday item. Around 1925, a 150 ml tin cost about 1.20 Reichsmarks – almost 2 percent of an average monthly wage. Adjusted for purchasing power, that would correspond in 2025 to roughly 75 to 80 euros. For large parts of the population, the cream was therefore not an everyday purchase but a targeted, occasionally affordable one – more a small prestige object than a mass article. It was a purchase to be saved up for and weighed.

At this time, better-paid white-collar employees, thanks to initial vacation rules and shorter working hours, were able to travel. For most people, however, holidays remained a rare privilege: industrial workers often had only a few days off per year, and travel remained a luxury that only a minority could afford. All the more alluring, then, was the idea spread in advertisements of sun, relaxation, and a tan – it linked products with longing.



NIVEA made clever use of this. Its advertisements put sporty, sun-tanned people front and center, so that with the introduction of the blue tin in 1925 a modern, active feeling of life was associated with the brand. In this way, NIVEA staged itself as part of a lifestyle that many desired – even if not all could live it in practice.

NIVEA's ability to hold its own in this period was due not only to the spirit of the times but also to clever brand management. The combination of consistent quality, distinctive design, professional advertising language, and strategic visibility in print media lent the product credibility at a moment when many people sought orientation. Clarity and continuity became valuable assets in a decade that mixed optimism with uncertainty.

Thus, in the 1920s, NIVEA became not only a successful care product but also a symbol of progress and self-care. The brand's success rested on a fine sensitivity to social change and on the promise of making a piece of modern lifestyle tangible. Even if that lifestyle was out of reach for many, they wanted to belong. That, precisely, was the brand's strength.

BACKGROUND

Mail to NIVEA – everyday experiences firsthand

Letters from the 1920s sent by consumers to Beiersdorf offer a glimpse into everyday use of NIVEA – away from advertising and brand management. Strikingly, almost all the letters include photographs, often showing seaside holidays. You see children with evenly tanned skin; in the accompanying notes it is repeatedly stressed that they returned "without any sunburn." The cream – which had no sun protection factor – was explicitly appreciated as protection against sun and wind, above all for sensitive children's skin. Individual letters also contain hints of a willingness to make the private shots available. In one case it says: "The photograph can be acquired by you for propaganda purposes." This phrasing suggests an early attachment to the product. The submissions, preserved today in the company archive in Hamburg, document everyday practices and perceptions around skin care at the time. Beyond that, they show what people more than 100 years ago considered worth telling.

Photograph enclosed with a consumer letter, German Baltic coast, 1927

Advertisement – Great Britain, 1930s

The 1930s in Germany were marked by economic hardship and political upheaval. After the 1929 stock market crash, the country slid into a severe crisis. Foreign loans were withdrawn, exports collapsed, and many businesses had to close. Unemployment rose rapidly; everyday life was defined by privation. NIVEA Creme still did not automatically belong in every household – for many it remained too expensive.

With the National Socialists' rise to power in 1933, social role models changed as well. The body became political: health, performance, and strength were held up as ideals. Programs such as "Kraft durch Freude," organized hikes, and mass sports amplified this claim. NIVEA's imagery – sun-tanned, active people out in nature – fit into this new normality without appearing overtly political. Keywords like air, sun, and movement stood at the center. A cream hat cared for and protected the skin fit that picture perfectly.

The image of women shifted, too. In public, the role of mother was emphasized. At the same time, women remained important as consumers. Grooming was permitted as long as it looked simple and healthy. Here, too, NIVEA matched the ideal – with restrained visuals and reliable effect.

While the brand's outward appearance remained stable, the company itself came under pressure. In 1933, several Jewish members of Beiersdorf's executive and supervisory boards left – a direct consequence of the political climate. To avert further attacks, the company presented itself outwardly as unobjectionable – a step taken by other firms in comparable positions as well.

At home, NIVEA stayed present. The blue tin with white lettering changed hardly at all, and political symbols were deliberately absent. With her advertising campaigns, Elly Heuss-Knapp ensured that the brand remained visible without being politically co-opted.

Even in the late 1930s, the characteristic blue-and-white was regarded as the brand's unifying hallmark – across borders, too. Yet even then it became apparent that the international brand presence would not remain assured. With the end of the Second World War there followed a far-reaching loss of trademark rights in many countries. The consequences were grave: not only was access to foreign markets lost; the previously uniform design also began to fragment regionally – Beiersdorf for decades.

Right:
Advertisement –
Germany, 1935;
below: 1939

BACKGROUND

Between adaptation and stance – brands in the Nazi Era

In the National Socialist era, many German brands had to make difficult choices. Anyone wishing to survive economically could hardly escape political and public pressure. Firms with Jewish owners were publicly attacked or boycotted. Beiersdorf was affected as well: in 1933, several Jewish members of the executive and supervisory boards left the company under pressure from the regime. The group then presented itself as "Christian-led" to avert further damage.
At the same time, social values shifted. Health, physical strength, and the Volksgemeinschaft (the Nazi ideal of a racially defined "people's community") moved to the fore. Companies adapted – partly out of conviction, partly out of fear or calculation. Many changed their advertising, either avoiding political statements or cautiously aligning with the new zeitgeist. Some openly supported the regime; others tried to continue as inconspicuously as possible. Beiersdorf, with NIVEA, also moved within this field of tension – like many brands, between caution, adaptation, and the attempt to preserve its identity.

NIVEA Sports Powder, 1936

A leaflet launches a new era

NIVEA's design change in 1925 began with a simple information leaflet. Its exact use is undocumented. It was probably handed to customers and inserted into the company's printed price lists at the time for distribution and reference.

For the first time, the document shows the new blue-and-white NIVEA design and explains that this look will now replace the familiar yellow appearance. Despite the change, the contents of the tins – whether yellow or blue – remain the same, "for these cannot be improved." Only the design now appears "in a beautiful blue attire."

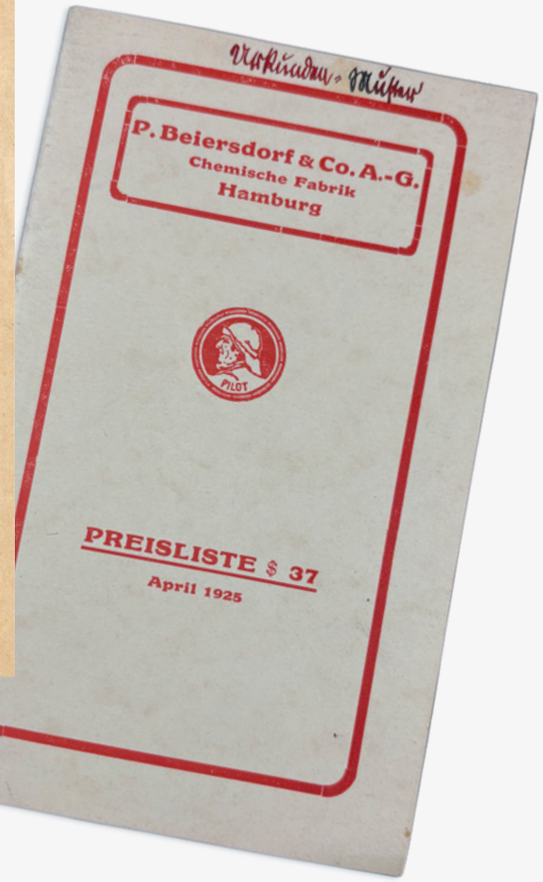
To spread the new 1925 brand design, NIVEA set the course for a new brand image with a bold campaign – perfectly catching the spirit of the age. Instead of stiff sailor suits, the posters showed three cheeky Hamburg boys in open white shirts: relaxed, full of joie de vivre, completely natural. Juan Gregorio Clausen, Beiersdorf's head of advertising, stumbled across the photo by chance and was immediately enthusiastic – for him the "NIVEA boys" embodied the new brand values perfectly: trust, honesty, naturalness.

The image of the Wiethüchter brothers became an icon and marked the start of a new brand communication. NIVEA thus moved away from classic female motifs and redefined the self-image of care – modern, clear, family-oriented. The advertising success inspired the next step: "NIVEA girls" were sought – again as a trio. In an early forerunner of today's casting shows, an ad invited sisters to apply. Rather than glamour, the brief called for "fresh, natural girls." Hundreds of applications arrived, and the winners were celebrated in a series of ads.

The new blue tin already carried the additional note "for skin care" in the German market, as did its yellow predecessor. Internationally, this information was omitted, and the new NIVEA tin bore only the words "NIVEA Creme" on its lid.

Although the leaflet referred only to NIVEA Creme and NIVEA Soap – the two most successful NIVEA products of the period – the NIVEA range was already much larger in 1925.

Hair-care and shaving products, powder, and the children's items likewise received the new blue-and-white design from 1925 onward.



The leaflet announces the new blue design. It would become available as soon as the familiar yellow packages were used up. In the 1925 price list, this information was likewise circulated to drugstores, pharmacies, and wholesale dealers across the sector.

Grita Loebsack
President NIVEA,
Beiersdorf AG

It’s Not Just a Color

An essay by Grita Loebsack

“Let’s change the blue and white of NIVEA.”

If the Supervisory Board or our CEO ever asked me to do this, I’d probably pause for a while and say: “Well… that would certainly spark a passionate debate.”
After all, when you’ve been working on securing one of the world’s most iconic brand identities, you don’t just jump onto changing the color. Blue and white signal NIVEA. And with that familiarity, comfort and trust.

But this wasn’t always the case.

In 1925, Juan Gregorio Clausen made a bold move: he replaced the yellow floral tin with a modern and reduced blue-and-white design in bold letters. Back then, NIVEA made up just 5 percent of Beiersdorf’s revenue and was far from the icon it is today. The decision may have been a relatively easy one: the look no longer fit the times, it stood for the “old” and a bold change was necessary. Yes, it was brave and it worked.

Today, things are very different. NIVEA is found in homes around the world. The blue color isn’t just a tin color – it’s our logo, part of our identity, our trust mark. It’s protected by law, and even more so secured by decades of love and loyalty.

Now imagine – just hypothetically – that someone insisted on changing the color. And I had to lead it.

First, I’d ask: WHY? The reason would have to be clearly strategic and fundamental, not just stylistic.

Then the cascade would begin: redesigning an icon, then thousands of more products, digital assets, brand guidelines, trademarks. And most importantly, we’d need to be able to show & reassure consumers: it’s still NIVEA. The brand you’ve trusted for years.

Even if hypothetically this change was done flawlessly, it would take decades to rebuild what our iconic combination of blue and white has given us over time: familiarity, comfort, and trust.

So, you may wonder: Would I do it?
Clearly: No. I wouldn’t.

Because sometimes, the boldest move isn’t to change.

It’s to protect what already connects us: a color rooted in heritage, carried quietly, confidently, and unmistakably — every single day.

IMPRINT

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