

Packaging gets psyched

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How some food marketers use emotional triggers and sensory cues in packaging design to attract buyers and to create a bond with the brand.

Ask consumers what they like about a food package they've never seen before, and chances are they won't be able to put it into words. They have an emotional reaction to the package, which, best case, makes them desire the product and leads them to purchase it.

To elicit those positive emotional responses, food processors can put consumer psychology to work as they design their packaging and leverage the unconscious triggers that predispose consumers toward products.

The rewards of this package-design strategy extend far beyond product trial. If the product and package are satisfying during use, the consumer's initial reaction to the package is reinforced. The natural follow-on is to buy the product again. And again.

Consumer research has shown that consumers transfer their perception of a package to the product it contains. Louis Cheskin, a mid-20th century marketing innovator, coined a phrase for this phenomenon: "sensation transference."

"Sensation transference is the theory that whatever people see on the package, they attribute to the product," says Katy Haberkern, director-account management with consumer insights-based consulting firm Cheskin (www.cheskin.com (<http://www.cheskin.com>)), Redwood Shores, Calif. In other words, "The package is the product."

As an example, Cheskin conducted a taste test of 7-Up that had been filled into cans that were more yellow than the packaging consumers were used to. Although the drink was the same as in the original can, tasters thought the formulation had changed. The can looked different, and that created a perception of difference in the product's flavor.

Creating the desired perception of the product requires detailed attention to not only the package's looks, but also how it feels in the hand and even the sounds it makes. The package's sensory cues are an enormously important contributor to the consumer's experience of the product.

"Sensory cues today are very advanced," Haberkern says. "The challenge is determining which cues add value to the brand."

The color component

Some marketers contend that of all the visual cues a package incorporates, color is the single most important. Consumers have only seconds to make a purchasing decision in the supermarket, and color registers much faster than text or complex graphics.

Colors are associated with various emotional states and need to convey an appropriate mood for the product and/or brand. In some parts of the grocery store, like the cereal aisle, the colors on the packages "are screaming 'buy me,' but not all products want to do that," says Ed Cristman, design director at Axion Design (www.axiondesign.com (<http://www.axiondesign.com>)), San Anselmo, Calif.

Products such as wine and gourmet items, like dipping oils and tapenades, are designed for a sophisticated consumer; therefore, the packaging tends to feature "tasty, earthy colors" rather than bright, bold hues, Cristman explains. These items are "savored over time. You don't just shovel them down. It's more experience-based."

Dan Olson, creative director at Duffy & Partners (www.duff.com (<http://www.duff.com>)), Minneapolis, adds: "So much of food packaging is about appetite appeal. We don't want our potatoes green or our ketchup blue, and the package shouldn't miscue the experience of the product" by incorporating inappropriate colors.

Olson adds that "sweeter things are more forgiving" in terms of package color, because they are perceived as fun or pleasing rather than a source of nutrition. A walk down the candy aisle in any store demonstrates the abundance of color on packaging for sweets.

Package color is influenced by trends, as well. Green has emerged as a popular color for products positioned as healthy and/or environmentally friendly; historically, green was rarely used on food packaging. Blue is still used somewhat tentatively, except in two categories: milk and water.

Graphic subtleties

Additional visual cues include the package's typefaces, logo, illustrations, photos and other graphic design elements. These components individually communicate the brand's attributes and equities, and do so even more within the completed design.

For example, package graphics for Tanimura & Antle Inc. (www.taproduce.com (<http://www.taproduce.com>)), Salinas, Calif., position the brand as friendly and approachable while reinforcing its heritage as a family-owned produce company. The package graphics include an oval logo and a curved, flourishing typeface. They also

Tanimura & Antle's graphics position the brand as friendly and approachable while reinforcing its heritage as a family-owned produce company.

incorporate an illustration of the company's founding partners talking in the field, which expresses the brand's down-to-earth and fresh attributes.

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Thin is in: They may look like other packages in their categories, but Kellogg's Smart Start cereal box and Coca-Cola's Tab energy drink are a little thinner than competing packages.



Note to Marketing

Designing a package that elicits the desired emotional response to the product is becoming more scientific, thanks to a new method that combines consumer psychology with package design.

Called NeuroDesign, the proprietary technique is grounded in a combination of neuroscience, psychology and iconology. The method is in development at design and innovation firm laga.

"Emotion drives purchasing decisions," explains J. Duncan Berry, laga's director of applied iconology. "NeuroDesign is the application of consumer insight to enhance performance at shelf using emotional cues. This method brings the upstream conceptual thinking into a funnel to drive the development of actual designs."

The NeuroDesign deliverables include a visual encyclopedia, or Emotional Analog Map. This document includes images of facial expressions, gestures/postures and archetypes, all keyed to consumers' emotional engagement with the product.

Using the map, the designer can create a package that resonates with consumers in a way they feel deeply. Their subsequent behavior, not surprisingly, is to buy the product.

The graphics on wine labels for Stolpman Vineyards (www.stolpmanvineyards.com (<http://www.stolpmanvineyards.com>)), Solvang, Calif., communicate a different story — that of a serious, premium wine maker.

"The squareness of the Stolpman typeface and label shape provide a foundation that's strong and confident," says Steve Glanzer, a designer at Axion, which created the package designs for both Stolpman Vineyards and Tanimura & Antle. The Stolpman label "is standing there saying, 'We are high-quality.'"

Uno Foods Inc. (www.unofoods.com (<http://www.unofoods.com>)), Boston, used package graphics to convey the restaurant quality of its refrigerated retail pizzas. The new package looks like an upscale version of an Uno restaurant take-out box and incorporates typefaces from the Uno menu.

Repetitive text in the background subtly reinforces the message with information about the product's fresh ingredients, its restaurant quality and the fact that each pizza is made by hand.

"The package really invites the consumer to remember what it's like to eat in an Uno restaurant," says Robert Hill, design director with Acton, Mass.-based Wright Design Inc. (www.wrightds.com (<http://www.wrightds.com>)), which designed the new Uno package.

The final touch on the Uno package is a large die cut, front and center, that reveals the delectable looking pizza. Although this cue is visual, it does double duty by opening a Pavlovian path straight to the taste buds.

Shape matters



Crosse & Blackwell's Waistline foods in the U.K. reinforce their weight-control message with a distinctive hourglass-shaped can.

Another important visual cue is the package's physical shape. Product attributes or benefits, portrayed in the package shape, serve as a gentle or even subliminal reminder of what the product promises to deliver.

For example, the Kellogg's Smart Start cereal box is as wide and tall as competitive products but not as thick. The box's shape resonates with the product's emphasis on healthiness, which consumers often conflate with being trim.

Similarly, the can for Tab Energy, a Coca-Cola low-calorie energy drink for women, is tall and slender compared with standard soda cans. And it is actually smaller, holding 10.5 oz. rather than 12 oz. Crosse & Blackwell Waistline diet products, from Premier Foods (www.premierfoods.co.uk (<http://www.premierfoods.co.uk>)), St. Albans, England, are packaged in a distinctive hourglass-shaped can to reinforce the brand name and the product's weight-control benefits. Paris-based Crown Food Europe (www.crowncork.com (<http://www.crowncork.com>)) supplies the shapely cans.

Package structures for liquids and wet foods are inherently "analogous to the human form," says J. Duncan Berry, director of applied iconology at Cincinnati-based laga (www.laga.com (<http://www.laga.com>)), a design and innovation firm.

"Consciously, of course we don't think of these packages as surrogate people. But in the creative unconscious, they do speak to us that way," Berry adds. Thus, mapping human physical characteristics onto packages acknowledges consumers' unconscious projections.

Consider the distinctive bottle for Knob Creek Kentucky bourbon. "It's quite a large bottle, with masculine shoulders. We widened it and gave it some masculine girth," says Olson, from Duffy & Partners, the firm that designed the package. "It's a new interpretation of a glass bottle, and on the shelf it has presence."

A more literal example of anthropomorphism, one that's no longer available but lives on in the memories of the boomer



generation, is the Aunt Jemima Syrup bottle. The package depicted the brand's namesake, right down to her facial features, in amber glass with a yellow screw top.

Tactile and sound cues

Novel shapes can act as both visual and tactile cues, silently encouraging consumers to touch the package. And "when consumers touch a product, the likelihood of purchase sky rockets," laga's Berry says.

"You can induce tactile response by including an unconscious trigger" in the package, such as shape or texture, he adds. "That's what designers and marketers are aiming to do."

Rough finishes on paperboard packaging, embossing or etching on glass bottles and jars and molded features on plastic containers are a few ways food packagers incorporate texture.

Printing techniques can be used for this purpose. For Bawls Guarana, a high-caffeine energy drink, brand owner Hobarama LLC (www.bawls.com (<http://www.bawls.com>)), Miami, uses 16-oz. cans that have been texturized using foaming ink. The ink is applied in a pattern of dots that amplifies the can's graphic design. The company also uses bumpy-textured glass bottles for the product.

Sound cues can be incorporated into packages, as well, to enhance consumers' experience of the package and product. Examples include the pop of an induction seal as it is broken and the audible click of a closure snapping shut.

These kinds of sounds provide feedback for the consumer, "and we're always looking for feedback. People can be quite attracted to something like that," says Belinda Winder, consumer psychologist and senior lecturer at Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, England. "We're playful, curious creatures. We like to make sounds, and we like feedback, so if you can incorporate a sound" into a package, consumers will respond.

Package sounds can be powerful mood stimulators. A classic is the pop of a champagne cork. Another is the opening sound of a beverage-can pull ring. "There's a feeling that goes with that," Winder says. "Poof! I'm going to get my drink now. The moment of relaxation has started with that sound."

The significance of a sound sometimes becomes apparent only after a packaging change, as in the case of the peanut marketer that switched from a steel can to a composite can a few years ago.

The steel can made a whooshing sound when opened, and research by Cheskin revealed that consumers heard the whoosh as a freshness cue. But for cost reasons, the brand owner switched to the non-whooshing composite container.

After making the switch, the brand lost market share. "We can't prove it," says Cheskin's Haberkern, "but we suspect the loss of the whooshing sound was a driver in that."

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Aimed at a male audience, Knob Creek Kentucky bourbon comes in a bottle design with "masculine shoulders," and other male-oriented cues.