

Tactile branding leads us by our fingertips



The iconic Heinz Ketchup bottle. (Courtesy Heinz)

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Most of our senses are bombarded by stimulation on a daily basis as corporate branders attempt to attract our sense of smell, sight, taste and hearing.

But now those same marketers are trying, more than ever before, to tap into our sense of touch in an attempt to lead us by the fingertips towards their products.

Tactile branding isn't new. In fact the iconic Coca-Cola bottle is one of the earliest examples of a product that came in a package so unique it could be identified by feel alone, even buried in a cooler full of ice and other bottled beverages.

The architects behind Heinz 57 ketchup learned from Coke's 1915 example, as did those who marketed Charmin toilet paper "(please don't squeeze the Charmin)" Bic pens, Toblerone chocolate bars and Moleskine notebooks all followed suit.

But those are exceptions to the rule, and tactile branding has been largely overlooked as a strategy to help consumers connect with a product, with most companies trying hardest to make their product appeal to our eye while neglecting our other senses.

That's changing fast, says Duncan Berry, founder of marketing consultancy Applied-Iconology.

Industry, he tells CTV.ca from Cape Cod, Mass., is realizing that touch-marketing works. Big companies like Apple are capitalizing on the revelation.

"Tactile branding is a method that helps marketers plant a clear idea of a product's identity and benefit -- psychological, emotional and functional -- without having to use optical awareness, or oral or scent. It's strictly by touch. They want to convey a benefit and awareness and an identity, by touch," he explains.

Apple's personal music player is one of the most obvious examples.

"If we were to put 10 different MP3 players on a table, do you think if you were blindfolded you could tactfully identify the iPod?" he asks. The answer for anyone who has ever owned an iPod, of course, is yes.

"And that is an example of successful tactile branding," Berry responds almost gleefully.

From laptops to iPods to desktop computers -- many of Apple's products have texture and shape that set them apart. The new MacBook Pro laptop is even cooler to the touch than its competitors, possibly reinforcing a subconscious link between the product and the user's concept of 'cool', Berry says.

But tactile branding isn't exclusive to high-end electronics. Though often less obvious, examples abound in almost every industry, product and field.

One of the most recent is Alli, the first fat-blocking pill approved by the U.S. Federal Drug Administration. Think what you will about the controversial quick-fix to weight loss with the nasty side effects, but the branding behind the product exhibits sheer brilliance, Barry says.

The drug comes with a reinvented pillbox called a 'shuttle' that carries the medication. It has a unique shape, can be opened with one hand and is made with soft rubber and careful texturing that is pleasing to the touch.

"It looks like a bean pod," says Barry with undisguised excitement - admittedly, he does consultancy work for the company that makes Alli.

"It's almost like you're grabbing the hand of a friend, almost a clasp, that's a very subtle but direct connection to the idea of someone who's going along this journey with you -- a friend and an ally. They've aligned their brand very well along this tactile branding approach."



Nick d'Ambrosia, 17, holds up his iPod inside a classroom at Mountain View High School in Meridian, Idaho on April 13, 2007. (AP Photo/Troy Maben)



Steven Burton, vice-president weight control division of GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare, displays a starter pack of alli in New York on May 22, 2007. (AP / Richard Drew)



Following the Japanese company's successful takeover of Canada's third biggest brewer, Sleeman Breweries Ltd. Chairman and CEO, John Sleeman, left, and Sapporo Breweries Ltd. Senior Operating Officer Nobuhiro Hashiba pose in Toronto on Wednesday, October

18, 2006. (CP / Aaron Harris)

Martin Lindstrom, a globe-hopping "brand-futurist" and the author of "Brand Sense: Build Powerful Brands through Touch, Taste, Smell, Sight, and Sound,"

argues that advertisers have traditionally focused on sight and sound, but have largely ignored touch.

"In the world of marketing and branding, basically you only use one sense; you use the sense of sight. And if you're very good you may use the sense of sound, and that's about it. In fact 83 per cent of all the communication you and I are exposed to every day is only appealing to the sense of sight," Lindstrom says by phone from Columbia.

Slowly and steadily, companies are realizing that's not good enough.

Lindstrom notes that Japanese beer-maker Sapporo has seen its sales skyrocket in North America and Europe, driven largely by the unique, tall, silver bullet-like can it created for its product. And the iPod -- sleek, heavy and pleasing to the touch -- has created a new standard for the feel of quality in an MP3 player.

That kind of success, he says, is beginning to trigger a widespread realization that touch is a vital aspect of marketing. And companies that don't pick up on the phenomenon will be left behind -- Lindstrom predicts.

"It's really about to break through now," Lindstrom says. "I know from studies we conducted recently that 35 per cent of the largest brands in the world -- so the first 100 brands -- right now are working on a sensory branding strategy."

This approach works because human beings are "hard-wired" to make value judgments based on the way things feel, more so than the way they look or sound, Lindstrom says. He believes this goes back to our ancestors, who shook hands as a way of assessing an enemy's strength or ensuring they were unarmed. Even though we don't always realize it, we still use the sense of touch to assess people and things.

"So it is very serious stuff when it comes to building brands, and my point is that basically we have totally forgotten that."

As the curvy Coke bottle proved over decades of popularity, touch marketing has the ability to transcend borders, languages and cultures to reach the masses

As Randall Frost, author of "The Globalization of Trade," put it in a paper for the online industry site Brandchannel.com, touch is a form of communication that doesn't use words and therefore isn't limited by the language barrier.

The brilliance of the Coke bottle, Frost says, lies in the fact that it conjured up cultural imagery in whatever setting it was found -- in the U.S., it was the hoop skirt or the curves of sex symbol Mae West, in South America it was reminiscent of the coffee bean.

"Because formal languages are culturally derived, the growth of global brands would seem to be inherently limited by the absence of any common global language," he writes.

"However, given the ability of the proximity senses -- touch, taste, and scent -- to establish bonds between consumers and brands at the sub-cultural level, could one of them -- say, touch -- potentially serve as the lingua franca of global branding?"

If the Coke bottle -- an iconic piece of glass that has somehow managed to reach consumers around the world -- is any example, tactile branding has the potential to speak volumes.

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