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FEATURE

MORE THAN A FEELING

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The next big thing in branding is just a touch away.

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When friends and I were sitting in a sushi restaurant recently, we were so busy talking that I didn't pay much attention as the waiter brought our drinks. I barely broke eye contact as I reached for my beer, but then, suddenly, I felt a frisson of excitement. The can felt smooth and sensuous, the metal was refreshingly cold (promising beer chilled just the way I like it) and the shape was ergonomically designed to fit comfortably in my hand. If this had been a blind taste test, I could have identified the brand just by its touch: Sapporo draft from Japan.

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Like most successful branding, more than one sense is involved in marketing Sapporo beer. The elegant appearance of the tall, slightly fluted aluminum can (sight) is important, as is whether the product itself lives up to expectations (taste, smell). But, perhaps surprisingly, it was how it *felt* that transformed what had been a modest-selling imported beer into an instant hit in both Europe and North America. (Sapporo has tripled its sales since the mid-1990s.)

Skin, according to social anthropologist Ashley Montagu, is “the oldest and most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication.” Arguably, touch is the most emotional of our senses, as well as one of the most overlooked ways to reach the ad-savvy, brand-weary masses. As Randall Frost put it in a paper for the online industry site Brandchannel.com, touch just might become the “lingua franca of global branding.” Now that global brands must transcend languages, cultures and habits, is it any wonder that companies are finally realizing that every sense should be exploited?

In the book *Brand Sense: Build Powerful Brands through Touch, Taste, Smell, Sight, and Sound*, Martin Lindstrom argues that, traditionally, marketers have emphasized sight and, to a lesser degree, sound, while largely ignoring the impact of the other senses. (Read *enRoute*'s March 2006 story on sonic branding at enroutemag.com.) Now Lindstrom estimates that most brands on the Fortune 1000 list could – and therefore should – leverage the tactile aspect of their products.

Materials alone, not to mention shape and size, have become a hotbed in packaging science. A new kind of polymer means that companies can, for example, package a bath product in a pearlescent wrapping that looks just like silk. Recently, papermaker Arjowiggins created a new varnish for its Curious Collection of suede-like paper – the appeal is that it actually feels like real suede, with all the brand equity that implies. Naturally, the new paper is called Touch. (Jennifer Lopez used the paper to package her perfume Glow by JLo.) Or consider Apple's iconic breakthrough. “Even if you were blindfolded, I'm pretty sure I could put the five bestselling music players in front of you and you could touch your way to the iPod,” Lindstrom told me.

While the potential of touch branding was, until recently, largely untapped, one of the earliest examples hit shelves more than 90 years ago. In the early 20th century, Coca-Cola lawyers urged management to create packaging that could be protected by trademark and patent laws. “We need a bottle that a person will recognize as a Coca-Cola bottle, even when he feels it in the dark,” they said. The result was the contour bottle, also known as the hobble skirt or the Mae West. Legendary industrial designer Raymond Loewy described it as “a masterpiece of scientific functional planning.”

Fast-forward almost a century as everything from digital gadgets and cars to beauty products is turning to touch, often aiming for full-on sensory overload. The experience of a new car involves the *feel* of the seats, controls and steering wheel; the *sound* of the door shutting and the power windows rising and falling; and the new car *smell* – an artificial scent sprayed inside cars as they leave the production line. Touch and technology meet in the otherwise conventional Bang & Olufsen BeoCom 2, an elegantly sculpted cordless handset that's the ultimate tech sensation. Oddly, the much-hyped Prada Phone by LG (KE850) and Apple's iPhone not only look awkward when held to the ear as a phone, but their tablet-style touch screen lacks the familiar raised keys and grooves. Some critics fault them for being anti-touch.

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