

# Effective Package Design

## *How emotional connections affect the bottom line*

It's becoming increasingly difficult to reach consumers. More and more, people tune out product communication, particularly advertising, which is alternately perceived as invasive or thought of as entertainment. Product packaging has the potential to be one of the most effective means to communicate directly with consumers and drive bottom-line growth. However, many brands lack a vital ingredient for success: a unique personality that creates an emotional connection with consumers. This approach may seem obvious, but too many products are marketed according to functional benefits alone. As Ansel Adams said, "There's nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept."

The ability to evoke an emotional response is the hallmark of great brands and the characteristic that distinguishes them from commodities. Despite today's saturated market, there is an opportunity for brands to grow—if they are built around a compelling core idea. The approaches vary among niche brands, private label brands and name brands, but in each case successful brands rely on packaging to form relationships with consumers.

Connecting with consumers is critical because having a great product is no longer enough. While quality will always be the most important component for success, the speed of innovation and the myriad choices facing consumers have resulted in an overwhelming number of undifferentiated brands. The most successful brands start with a great concept and use packaging as a vehicle to transcend the product itself and evoke a positive emotional response.

Emotion is the key element that can transform a rational choice into a brand experience—for example, buying milk versus buying the idea of health and quality embodied as milk. The difference is important because, fundamentally, consumers want to feel good about the products they buy and use.

The challenge lies in creating a concept that is both original and relevant. This is a manageable task—as long as a brand does not try to be all things to all people. Niche brands understand the power of this approach. "Niche" is a word that many marketers find unpalatable because it is often negatively associated with limits. But those same limits allow niche brands one luxury that many larger brands do not enjoy: focus.

By zeroing in on a relatively small demographic or geographic region, niche brands are able to develop unique personalities that speak directly to their target audiences. The result is a core group of loyal brand advocates who can help build awareness and credibility beyond the original target audience—possibly enabling growth into the mainstream market and extension into related product categories.

Glacéau's vitaminwater—a relative latecomer to the flavored/enriched water category—is a niche brand with a very distinct personality that can help the brand grow beyond water. Unlike its competitors, Glacéau eschewed evocative imagery and opted instead for a clean label that features a different color for each flavor and a higher-than-average amount of copy. In this instance, the typography and brand voice—irreverent, non-nonsense and informative—are the heroes. The brand experience is not about the product but about the tongue-and-cheek story built around it. Consumers who choose Glacéau's vitaminwater are doing more than just buying water, they are buying into an attitude. Clever copy that reveals a unique brand personality and the use of typography as the primary design element are approaches that have also been successful for brands such as the Philosophy cosmetics line and the Rand McNally travel accessories line.

Niche brands exemplify the power of packaging to communicate a highly differentiated personality that enriches the product experience. This

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approach, however, is not the exclusive domain of niche brands—it can also be successfully applied to larger, more established brands that want to target several different audiences in specific ways.

For over 100 years, the Coleman brand had produced a wide range of outdoor activity products geared primarily toward weekend family camping. More recently the company decided to launch a new premium camping line designed to appeal to the more adventurous outdoor enthusiast. With this goal in mind, Coleman made a dramatic departure from established category packaging cues. Images of tents, lanterns and sleeping bags that once dominated Coleman's packaging—rendering it indistinguishable from competitors—were replaced by bold duotone images of creatures that are encountered in the wild: snakes, lizards and other exotic species. Coleman's new Exponent packaging succeeded because it went beyond communicating the functional benefits of the equipment and focused instead on evoking the outdoor experience and creating an emotional framework around the products.

In some cases it is appropriate for packaging to present an extremely abstract, emotional or creative context, particularly when the product itself is difficult to represent as an object of beauty or desire. The computer software category not only carries this burden, but it is also notorious for relying on product information—rather than innovative design—as the primary communication element.

Knowing that such an approach would not resonate with design-centric Macintosh aficionados, Microsoft completely transformed its OfficeMac packaging for the 2001 edition. Instead of featuring product benefit information, emphasis was placed on bold colors, amorphous shapes and a simple, sleek design that echoed the Macintosh aesthetic. In these ways, the new packaging acknowledged the importance of design to Mac users and gave them a product they could identify with and embrace.

Oftentimes for marketers, the issue is not a lack of awareness of the power of design, but rather an unwillingness to depart from established category design conventions, such as literal product imagery. Frequently in retail settings, such as supermarkets where competing products sit side-by-side, the temptation is to focus on quickly communicating what a product is rather than the idea it embodies. Shoppers already know which product categories they are shopping for—wine, juice, frozen food, healthy alternatives—so packaging that is focused on the product itself offers neither new information nor a unique experience that leads consumers to select one brand over another.

The same is true of packaging that relies on standard category color cues and generic verbal messages. The better-for-you food category fell victim to this approach when low-fat cookies were first introduced and a number of brands sported a green color scheme and verbal messages such as “fat-free” and “organic.” While the use of a particular color, word or phrase is effective in quickly associating a product with a category, that tactic dramatically reduces the product's differentiation relative to its competitors.

The large private label brand category has struggled to differentiate itself from established name brands. (Private label brands, however, have enjoyed recent success by creating a larger brand experience around products.) Two misconceptions have traditionally dominated the private label brand category and held back its growth: the notion that private label brands have to mimic the look of leading name brands in order to compete, and the assumption that consumers expect and look for a generic look—and that such packaging connotes value. As a result, private label brands have been missing a prime opportunity to connect with consumers who are already familiar with a retailer and extend that relationship to a private label brand.



A private label brand used on multiple products throughout a store—from cereal to personal care products to condiments—can create a unified brand experience, built around a differentiated idea, which delivers a powerful competitive advantage over name brands. Conversely, because a private label brand lives in a retail environment to which it is directly connected, it can elevate and reinforce the retail brand itself. Moreover, a private label brand is critical in defining a unique and ownable personality for the retailer.

One Bay Area gourmet food store was highly successful at making such a connection happen. In conjunction with its name change from Ultra Lucca to A.C. Ferrari Foods, the brand overhauled its private label packaging to reflect the ideas of heritage and passion for food in the Italian tradition. The new package design used rich materials such as craft paper, Old World-style typography and fresco-inspired illustrations to evoke an authentic, traditional Italian feel and build a cohesive story around the complete range of products.

Whether the challenge is creating packaging for a private label brand, an established name brand or a niche brand, the ultimate goal should be to generate an emotional response in consumers. Drawing on a brand's core idea and unique personality, a competitive advantage can be achieved through packaging design by bringing together the concrete world of products and the abstract yet highly effective technique of connecting with consumers on an emotional level. ■

An earlier version of this article titled "Making an Emotional Connection to Affect the Bottom-line: packaging products around ideas" was published in the San Francisco AMA newsletter (November 2003).

