



THE RISKY BUSINESS OF REDESIGNS

No wonder good packaging design is hard to find: developing it is an expensive, difficult and complex process. But done well, it will outlast any marketing campaign and blow the QR codes off the competition

BY MATTHEW CLARK

An on-pack offer is not packaging. A QR code that links to an augmented reality iPhone app is not packaging. Nor are on-shelf promotions, end-aisle displays, street teams, sampling programs, edu-tainment, transit shelters, web banners or coupons.

The good marketer's toolkit is vast and powerful. But amidst all the branding, marketing, persuading and promoting, the good ol' package often remains undervalued and ignored. I think I know why.

Packaging is a radically different design and marketing process

There may be no other form of branding and marketing that has such a complex and multi-faceted development process. Packaging design needs to consider highly technical production requirements like how the package seams, seals and fills on the production line. You must consider the on-shelf environment, like the width of your facings, shelf-height and stackability. You will have to consult the thousands of pages of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (and USFDA) packaging guidelines to determine allowable claims, font sizes for mandatory information, bilingual language requirements, and sizes and formats of nutrition panels. You will have to choose the substrate (or coating) and the corresponding printing method (litho, roto, flexo, screenprint), and then determine and adjust all imagery based on each technique's limitations. You will have to review how the product warehouses and ships and gets on the shelf.

And—oh yes—amidst all the restrictions and complexity, your creative needs to break through and shine! So you will also go through the already complex process of expressing the brand and standing out in the market like you would for any other serious marketing and creative effort: research, planning, big ideas, testing, design development and implementation. *Phew.*

Packaging has a very different life-cycle

A package's life is so much more than that one brief moment of on-shelf persuasion. Even before the package is fully complete, the sales team needs to sell it to retailers and distributors. Retailers control the pipeline, so you better have considered their needs and proven business-worth to them. The package lives on sellsheets and promotional materials long before it hits stores.

Once on shelf, the package is stacked and arranged in a whole host of (often poorly done) ways. If you are smart enough to have designed your packaging to stand out on the shelf, hopefully it will then be poked, prodded and scrutinized by shoppers. It will live in a cart, in a car, and, more often than that not, in the home.

Ahh, the coveted home. This is where the smart package shines; it reseals, it dispenses, it sits in the cupboard well, it doesn't fall over, it can be reused or recycled. It may be collected and talked about.

And in every moment of this glorious life-cycle, the brand speaks through the package. Let's see your average marketing campaign do that.

"Packaging is low design" and "ham-handed retail marketing"

Just like in the art world, there are low and high forms of the art of design and marketing. For many designers, the coveted identity program, annual report or interactive design project may be more alluring. For many creatives, the hallowed ground of TV is still king.

Is it because of all the low-end, shlocky, ill-considered, starburst-filled packaging design out there that designers and marketers see packaging in such a poor light? Or is packaging that way exactly because of this long-standing reputation?

I remember a recent design grad saying he "didn't do retail" design; the implication being that it was far too low-end for him. Yet this is exactly the opportunity for marketers and packaged goods brands: standing out from the pack through good thinking and good design.

Packaging is expensive

Never mind the couple hundred thousand dollars that will be put toward the design process. Think about the hundreds of thousands of dollars of new equipment required for packing and filling. The enormous expense of packaging materials, plates and cylinders, printing and converting. The cost of shipping, stocking and warehousing.

And the implications of a packaging redesign: updating every single piece of sales collateral, advertising and promotion across the brand.

On one level, it's no wonder packaged goods companies shy away from a redesign. But on the other hand, with the stakes and costs so high, why risk doing it badly? Done well, a packaging solution will far outlast any campaign or marketing program. I've seen packaging solutions exist with only minor updates for decades and still remain vital, relevant and persuasive. And frankly, that's the way they need to be given the high cost and effort involved.

The implications for marketers and packaged goods brands

Understand the monumental role that your packaging plays in your consumers' lives and in their product-selection process. Learn a lot and think hard. Marketers and their stakeholders will need to participate fully and be massively engaged. Don't ever rush the process: the stakes are far too high and the risk is too great to do this half-assed.

Remember that this solution should last years, so get it right. Then perfect it at every level, from functional considerations to branding and marketing. Don't treat your packaging like an ad, and don't try to compensate for a bad package with marketing. No starburst or AR promo will ever make up for it.

And when you come out at the end of the packaging process, beat all of your competitors silly. **M**

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