

# ***Packaging as the Intermediary between Consumer and Product: Review of a Course of Development***

Nostalgic TV series about the 'good old days' are tremendously popular. But viewers soon realise how undesirable it would be to turn back the wheel a hundred years or more in the light of our current high expectations regarding standards of living. Many consumers are, however, not aware of the fact that packaging contributes substantially to our current standards of living. It's state-of-the-art packaging that has made certain items conveniently available to the general public and easy to handle. In the past hundred or so years, the demands producers and consumers place on packaging have developed significantly. While initially the transportation and protection of goods were the primary functions served by packaging, today, it also acts as a brand-defining marketing instrument as well as an innovative and practical shell with ever new advantages for consumers.

Contemporary 21st century industrialised societies survive on a diet of the many, highly popular TV cooking series. At the same time, the number of pre-cooked, easily manageable dishes in which packaging plays a pivotal role is growing increasingly in retail outlets. Whether discounter or gourmet store, all retailers know the value of convenience. And convenience is made possible by sophisticated, market-oriented packaging solutions which often merely need to be popped in the oven or microwave, contents and all, before serving.

## ***Form makes brands, even way back when***

Just how different was everyday life a good century ago? Back then, the first brands were developed, some of them with a distinctive look that still remains to this day. And this at a time when people lived without the many little things we take for granted in modern life, such as electricity, modern home appliances and even running water – but not without packaged products and brands.

At the time, brands such as Odol, Maggi and Pelikan already boasted punchy sales packaging. Even if by today's design standards these sometimes look a little dated, they are nevertheless revered as brand icons. In fact, the typical shapes of the Odol or Maggi bottles can still be seen on store shelves today and contribute substantially to the success of the brand on the market as well as being easily recognisable at the point of sale. Long before self-service supermarkets became the norm, packaging played a major part in retail. As early as 1790, an earthenware bottle was designed especially for the Schweppes factory of London's Drury Lane. Nevertheless, packaging's primary functions back then were to make goods transportable and protect them from external influences.

## ***From plain protection to designer calling card***

Once the fundamental technical demands on packaging such as its protective and transport functions had been resolved, the first steps towards design were taken. In 1941, German brand and packaging design pioneer Walter Landor opened an agency under his surname in the USA that continues to write design history today. Landor's motto was: "Products are made in factories. Brands are created in the mind." Today, the globally active design company's client list includes Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Pepsico, Kraft Foods, Danone and Cadbury Schweppes.

Graphic designer Peter Schmidlin started his own business in Switzerland in 1950, thereby laying the foundation for one of the most renowned specialist packaging agencies in Europe – Schmidlin & Partner, later to be renamed FutureBrand Switzerland. It was only in the early 70s that packaging and brand designs began to gain currency. It was at this time that Peter Schmidt and Lothar B hm established their agencies in Hamburg, which would serve as the training grounds for so many designers in the coming decades. Many of these 'students' have subsequently branched out on their own. In the meantime, virtually every advertising agency has come to offer packaging and brand design services. Plus, there is also a wealth of companies that specialise in this area as well as solo acts working in this line.

## ***Point of sale as an advertising platform***

Progressive change in the world of retail and products initiated in the mid 20th century goes hand in hand with a growing number of potential advertising media. Even companies such as Nestlé and Unilever funnel their advertising budgets very selectively into chosen products and brands. Consumers in western industrialised nations not only have shorter working hours but also retire earlier. Although they have more leisure hours, less and less time is set aside to shop for daily necessities. This has been made possible through advances in food and packaging technologies, which often extend products' lives and makes them easier to handle.

These characteristics have resulted in a fundamental shift in the significance as well as the functions of packaging, which has long since established itself as the intermediary between product and consumer. The point of sale is now the advertising platform par excellence on which products compete for consumers' favour. Successful packaging concepts often also have to go head to head with copies, so-called "me-too" products.

On the over-filled supermarket shelves, myriad products compete for shoppers' attention. The decisive factor in this competition – especially when it comes to spontaneous and undecided customers – is packaging, which communicates the product and brand visually to the consumer. Despite all the other senses such as feel and smell which are repeatedly appealed to, the eye remains the organ which first comes into contact with packaging. Consequently, packaging's appearance must be designed with the various consumer target groups in mind so that they aren't merely made aware of it but enticed to purchase.

The moment of truth arrives in a supermarket or other retail outlet. The rule is: Only those products which land in shopping trolleys are successful products. High flop rates among newly launched or relaunched products demand that a careful and focused approach is taken with brands and products. And that goes not just for the products but also for the packaging as regards materials used, shape and design. Once the initial hurdle of the checkout has been cleared, packaging and contents "only" have to prove themselves at home. Have I really bought what the packaging promised? Does the packaging's USP correspond to the contents? Are there difficulties in opening the packaging? Do I like the product in my hands? If the responses to these questions are positive, then nothing stands in the way of repeat purchases.

### ***Fundamental importance of target-group research***

Consumers are constantly changing. This is not only a reference to the much trumpeted aging of the population but also target groups' evolving interests and needs in a changing world. Those who have jumped on the seniors bandwagon hoping to take advantage of their relatively deep pockets without becoming acquainted with their requirements or desires, shouldn't be surprised at a lack of success. Dr. Erika Neubauer, Manager of the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen (German Association of Senior Citizens Organisations – BAGSO), recommends calling on seniors as particularly sensitive and discerning testers in trials, especially when it comes to packaging.

Target-group research has long since established itself as one of the most important instruments for those involved in the marketing chain. New methods of finding out how consumers tick are constantly being developed with the aim of ensuring the success of a product on the market. But one of the key requirements is a real understanding of how the minds of a consumer segment work – how these people live and shop. The high flop rate among newly launched products underscores this.

### ***Discovering the consumers' world***

In order to plumb the depths of an individual target group's world, marketing and product managers are even offered courses in which they accompany consumers on shopping trips

or are given a peek into their cupboards. Such "voyages of discovery" into consumer worlds have become available ever since the growing realisation that knowing customers on paper is no longer enough. Hamburg-based psychologist Angelika von Aufsess describes the phenomenon behind this: "Everyone knows about it and lots of people talk about it, but hardly anyone does anything about it: Familiarity with customers and a profound understanding of their needs and lifestyles are vital to achieving success. More and more manufacturers of branded goods and service providers are on the lookout for new instruments beyond market research to facilitate more intensive dialogue between companies and consumers." Consequently, it has become standard practice for von Aufsess to move companies' and marketers' coaching sessions out from behind closed doors and into the world of consumers.

Swiss Professor Marco Casanova believes firmly in "Authentic Branding – the purposeful orchestration of all five senses". This focuses on posing consumers with a targeted emotional challenge. "The brand messages have to match the personality structure of the core target groups to unfold their full impact. Only through the target-group-specific emotional charging of a brand can intimacy, appeal and trust be built or strengthened. Through the repetition of emotionality, familiarity arises and trust arises from familiarity," says Casanova explaining his concept.

### ***Putting heads together at a round table***

In view of the difficult conditions on the market for new products, increasing credence is being given to what the industry has been advocating for years: putting heads together at a round table. This principle brings all those involved in the marketing chain together to work on a product's development and design process. Although the ideal scenario, this is still seldom the case in reality. Packaging continues to be treated as an afterthought to be dealt with once product development and advertising concepts have long been wrapped up. Which means that sufficient justice is still not being done to packaging's function as intermediary between the product and consumer.

An ideal opportunity to find out about all the latest developments in the packaging world was a visit to interpack PROCESSES AND PACKAGING, the world's No. 1 trade fair for the industry, which opened its doors in Düsseldorf between 24 and 30 April 2008. For designers and marketing managers in particular, this event offered exciting stimulus for achieving holistic target-group-oriented concepts. The INNOVATION PARC PACKAGING, focussed not only on aging societies but also on the point of sale. To this end, every link in the value-creation chain was addressed. The presentation was supported by the EHI Retail Institute and Pan European Brand Design Association (PDA) as well as Pro Carton.

*(Source: Interpack 2008, Courtesy: Messes Düsseldorf Press)*