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Judging a book by its cover: why packaging tells your brand story best

In a recent keynote speech to Google, 'All Marketers Are Liars', author Seth Godin analysed the massive difference between the US marketing spend (per car sold) of BMW and Lincoln Mercury.

He explained the 40-fold extra cost of the latter's marketing as the price of "making average cars for average people and then spending lots of money hyping them". In contrast, he describes BMW as having "a marketing department called engineering, which keeps making stuff that people choose to talk about".

BMW has used design to build in most of the marketing it needs, so that its brand sells itself to a large extent.

Because of a fascinating psychological phenomenon called "sensation transference", you could argue that there is no significant difference between the design of a BMW car and a bag of Walkers crisps. In both cases, the experience of consuming the product is inextricably linked to the packaging, where the performance of the imagery is as important as absolute product attributes like taste, nutritional value, acceleration and comfort.

This is the reality behind the famous description of packaging as "the silent salesman". The importance of packaging design is set to increase further because the model of business over the past 50 years is changing. In what Godin describes as "the death of the TV/Industrial complex", people are no longer prepared to passively consume slick advertising skilfully applied to often mediocre products and services.

Not only do they not want to but they don't

have to; the days of "as seen on TV" are nearly over, both in terms of watching classic persuasion-based advertising and people believing it's true. The future is permission-based and on-demand, and it requires genuine product quality, authenticity, passion and creativity.

This is not to say that consumers don't want to buy brands. Far from it, the need to define our self-esteem and status through our consumption choices has never been greater. In an uncertain and confusing world, great brands still stand out as beacons of clarity, direction and hope – just ask Barack Obama.

Hope and optimism

According to John Gerzema and Ed Lebar, authors of *The Brand Bubble*: "Consumers have concluded that brands in their repertoire have various levels of financial and emotional investment, with most of them not worth the effort. Across the myriad purchases they make in their daily lives, they are pruning their portfolio to a special set of brands that help them feel they are moving forward and offering new ideas, hope and optimism."

The rest are being left to "fight for existence on a hostile terrain of promotion and discounting" because of what these authors describe as a "perfect storm" of excess capacity, lack of creativity and loss of trust.

Gerzema and Lebar say: "Pretty much everyone everywhere accepts as a given that politicians lie, business is greedy and science fails regularly. When it comes to marketing and brands, consumers are left feeling vulnerable, cynical and detached".



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Against this backdrop of declining brand stature (which is at odds with the financial markets' valuation of these intangible assets, hence the "brand bubble" predicted by these authors), there are clearly brands that continue to inspire and grow. These are seen as deserving respect, not cynicism, because they still have what Gerzema and Lebar describe as "an insight into a truth we all want to believe".

In our view, these kind of brands have a great story. Think about innocent drinks (small guys with a dream shun nasty manufacturing practices and they even invite you to their offices, organise picnics and other cool stuff), Virgin (a maverick entrepreneur brings fun and creativity to stuffy, under-serviced businesses) and Unilever's Lynx/Axe (the normal guy can get the girl, aka "hope in a can").

But the really big difference between brands like these and those caught in Gerzema and Lebar's bubble, is their insights, their values, their beliefs, their actions, their "take on the world" are all perceived to be authentic, not a thin veneer of applied marketing. They are seen to exist for the reasons they say they do, to believe in something "real", and their actions aren't felt to be guided by focus groups or shareholder value.

As Ogilvy's Rory Sutherland put it at the recent Technology for Marketing & Advertising conference in London: "Great brands today don't need just a big idea, but a big ideal". For persuasive proof of this, check out www.campaignforrealbeauty.ca and see how Dove is becoming a great anti-authority on the beauty industry.



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- ① Bonne Maman is a timeless brand story
- ② The “little guy” story – also told by big guys
- ③ From cars to crisps, packaging enhances the experience

But what has all of this to do with packaging design? The answer to that is well expressed in Godin’s challenge to industries and organisations “to create ideas that have the marketing baked-in”. The first level at which this can happen is by developing a unique product recipe or formula, but in today’s world of rapid technology transfer there are fewer and fewer Mars bars out there.

However, a unique product experience can still be achieved through physical packaging, because this is where even a £1.99 aerosol gets to act like a BMW. The technical superiority of the liquid product inside may be slight, or even non-existent, but because of sensation transference from a technically superior pack it will be experienced as “better” (by a margin related to how much better the pack looks, feels and operates).

However, the real power of packaging design is not really technical, but lies in its power to tell your brand’s story. When designed (both physically and graphically) with the brand story in mind, packaging doesn’t just create better experiences; it creates better experiences that are intrinsically linked by consumers to the specific promise that your brand makes.

My favourite example of this has always been Bonne Maman jams, where the name, label design, wide-mouthed jar and gingham-patterned lid add up to an almost perfectly-formed brand story, and one which has brought the brand continuous success around the world for decades.

Borrowing a term from Chip and Dan Heath’s book ‘Made to Stick’, Bonne Maman is

a design that achieves the status of a “visual proverb” – it “owns” an archetypal story that has near-universal recognition and power. Perhaps this is why the design has remained constant for at least 25 years.

With such a rich source of “baked-in” marketing, Bonne Maman’s advertising task is to sell an idea that everyone on the planet has already bought. But few brands are lucky enough to have claimed a timeless brand story and then to have found themselves without much serious competition. For most brands, the story needs constant refreshment to remain relevant and noticed, especially if it’s a tale that has attracted a lot of me-too competitor products.

Original and best

For heritage brands such as Kellogg’s and Cadbury, the story doesn’t really change – it’s about being the original, the best and an expert dedicated to a particular idea, often product-based. For many consumers, this story has the power to create a mild feeling of shame when buying a cheaper substitute.

Unlike Bonne Maman, however, a 25-year-old Kellogg’s pack would look strangely out of place on modern shelves, hence the need to continually update the packaging to remain “of today” and compete with new challengers.

Growing successful brands requires continual innovation, which can lead to a credibility gap when they enter new categories pioneered by other brands.

In recent years, a spate of entrepreneurial brands have succeeded in entering the supermarket with a simple but powerful story

– “the little guy”. With limited advertising spend, these brands have told their story largely through packaging, and caused waves of frenetic activity among the big players whose market share they threaten.

The brief “do me an innocent” has crossed hundreds of designers’ desks in the last three years, with mixed results. Jordans cereal was a kind of innocent when it went mainstream 20 years ago, but more recently had started to look like an upmarket glossy magazine. Pearlfisher’s new “back to basics” design performs the clever trick of recapturing the brand’s authenticity.

On the other hand, Kellogg’s Nature’s Pleasure gives me the impression of having borrowed most of its story from bits of other people’s. So out with bright colours, varnishes and registered trade marks, in with humble logos, rough and ready packaging materials, naïve type in as many typefaces as possible, and chatty, homespun copywriting.

Which story will the consumer believe most? And how much advertising money will it take to get each one registered? We await the outcome with interest.

Meanwhile many boardrooms have recognised the difficulty of squeezing their megabrands “into the authentic space”, and have hatched plan B (“we’ll have to buy them”). So Unilever has acquired Ben & Jerry’s, Cadbury bought Green & Black’s, and Coke is talking about taking a stake in innocent. And they all lived happily ever after...

We all love a good story – our advice is to make sure that you’ve got one, and that your packaging tells it – truthfully and powerfully. ●



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