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What's in a packaging? A lot, actually

The packaging sector is at the heart of a perfect storm – the epicentre where the consumer, the product and the cash all convene in a spectacular display of buy-it-or-leave-it situation.

M Muneer

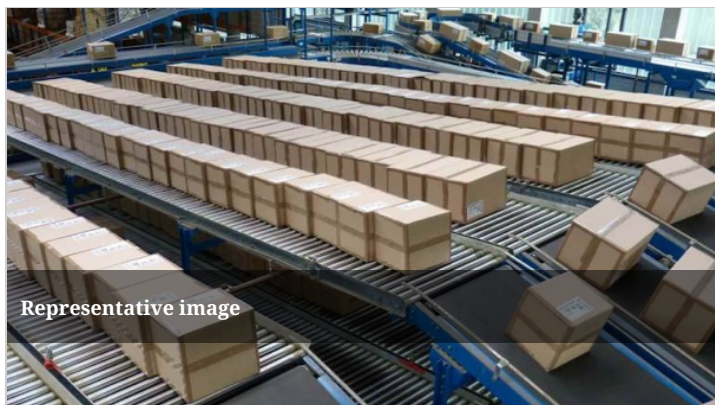


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If you own Apple products you will have noticed their sleek white packaging as compared to the typical dull industrial-grade packaging of a Dell or Lenovo.



Representative image

We buy many items based on packaging. In these days of media clutter and ad-aversion, we rely on the packaging to buy something – especially off retail shelves. When we do not read newspapers as a habit, or when we do not have the patience to watch TV commercials, how else will we know which brand is good for us? Good packaging sells stuff – no doubt about that.

Before dismissing this as a brilliant grasp of the obvious, allow me to explain: Packaging (all packaging, be it ketchup labels, boxes, bottles or toothpaste tubes) is at the heart of a perfect storm – the epicentre where the consumer, the product and the cash all convene in a spectacular display of buy-it-or-leave-it situation. Unlike any other source, packaging has the power to close a sale in the final critical moments of the purchasing decision cycle.

But is that the only job of packaging? Emphatically no. It also must vie for our attention in a cluttered retail shelf, induce a first-time purchase, even transform impulse buying into the emotional arena of brand loyalty. And this last item is the trickiest: Attract new customers while maintaining existing ones. The simple notion is that all package designs need to be effective – if consumers cannot find what you are selling in an overwhelming in-store environment, you have already lost the battle.

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But a new paradigm has evolved in major supermarket chains. The top-shelf, a previously undesirable position in most grocery stores, has now become quite fashionable. That is where they keep the odds-and-ends items: rare olives, special exotic jams, obscure sauces, single-source salad dressings, and so on. So when a consumer reaches way up to that shelf, she feels she's found something special – something exclusive that not everyone could find. And when she finds that can of rare olives, what does it usually look like? Often, the package design isn't

elaborate. It may not have bright colours, gold leaf design or cartoon character endorsements, because frequently, these little brands do not have the money for all that fanfare. The irony is this simplicity makes them stand apart. Indian supermarket shelves also display another peculiarity: Most brands prefer bright colours such as yellow or red. The big question to be asked by ITC and HUL is whether they should take a contrarian view when everyone else is of the same hue and colour.

In fact, it is the job of packaging to create clear, simple graphic messaging that is telegraphic, understandable and memorable. Consumers crave products, services, and ultimately packaging that simplifies their lives. And to this end, simplicity – and ultimately minimalism – will continue to be an increasingly powerful influence in retail.

Even though Apple need not worry too much about its packaging, Steve Jobs thought otherwise and it proved to add great value to the brand. The issue, however, is not just about clean design, because there are plenty of examples where this is not possible. Take the soap aisle. If you have shopped there recently, you know what you are up against. Trying to ensure that you buy the right one from whitening, perfumed, moisturised or simply the mildest one is a task in itself. In this instance, packaging needs to be a billboard for the product.

If conventional wisdom holds that you are only allowed seven words on a billboard that is 40 feet long, how on earth are you allowed 600 on a box that's 2 inches by 3 inches? Package design is more often than not charged with communicating a myriad of information: what the product is, who makes it, what it does, how it's different and why to buy it. So the answer then becomes creating an information hierarchy with clear messaging. And do not forget, you need to put the legally mandated product information and disclaimers in fine print!

You cannot simply sum up package design as the combination of art and science, or of simple design and well-coordinated information. Part of the magic equation is that packaging design has to be the most emotional selling tool.

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