

Sixteen Seconds

Hello, Caroline! Every Saturday at 10:00 a.m., Caroline piles her husband and two children into the family station wagon and heads to her favorite supermarket. She loves to shop for groceries and other supplies for her home. It's always a pleasure to stroll through the aisles toward a tower of canned soups or a kaleidoscopic display of breakfast cereals or laundry detergents.

Caroline looks forward to buying new products and takes time choosing her purchases. In each aisle of the store she picks up any intriguing cans, cartons, boxes, or bottles and carefully examines them. Sometimes, she'll even read their labels more than once to make certain she understands the information thoroughly.

Occasionally, she picks up a product impulsively, throwing a pretty package into her cart "just because," choosing something she's seen a clever commercial for, or even buying an item her husband or children want, even if she's never heard of it herself.

Goodbye, Caroline; hello new world! Caroline's world may have existed once, but a lot has changed since the days of leisurely shopping trips. Consumers have considerably reduced the time they spend on shopping, from an average of 90 minutes per trip in 1980 to only 40 minutes in 2000.

How has this changed purchasing behavior? People make decisions more quickly now; for example, the average amount of time spent per aisle in France is a mere 16 seconds.

Your brand has just sixteen seconds to be seen, understood and wanted.

Today's busy consumers are shopping experts; they understand typical store layouts, they know which brands and products are usually available, and—most important—they are conscious of, and able to resist, marketing gimmicks.

The marketplace has also become increasingly crowded; more products than ever are competing for the limited attention of harried consumers. The average number of products sold in France's large- and medium-sized stores doubled between 1994 and 2005. One study found that on average, only 31 percent of shoppers who passed a shelf with a new product on it even noticed it was there, selecting instead their old standby.

When shoppers are pinching pennies they are more likely to choose carefully and buy items only from their shopping lists. When money is tight they

are less likely to be impulsive—a marked change from Caroline and her in-store spontaneity.

Everything depends on the first impression, so the package must be much more than attractive—it needs to convince the consumer to buy. How do you get from the shelf to the shopping cart? Here are three principles important to consider when either redesigning a package or creating something new:

1. Be seen. An old ad slogan for anti-dandruff shampoo Head & Shoulders once proclaimed “you never get a second chance to make a first impression”—and that sentiment couldn’t be truer today. Package design helps products make a positive first impression, attracting consumers from the second they spy a product from the store shelf. Bold design done right can even catch the eye of a consumer who intended to purchase a different brand. Marketers must identify the recognizable design elements necessary to pique a shopper’s interest.

2. Be understood. It’s not enough to catch the consumer’s eye with an intriguing aesthetic; packaging needs to provide all the functional information that helps shoppers make purchasing decisions. They want to know the ingredients of a product, the quantities, and whether or not it’s organic. If it doesn’t meet their criteria, they won’t even consider tossing it in their shopping carts (no matter how pretty the package).

3. Be wanted. “What can it do for me?” Even when a design is attractive and clearly communicates the product’s attributes, it must still convey the way it can best benefit customers. These days many brands try the “good value for the money” angle—but this is not enough. The best way to be wanted is to offer consumers a differentiated, unique benefit that no other similar product provides.

For example, Ariel Cool Clean’s message-centric package communicates how customers—and the earth—can benefit when this laundry detergent is purchased. Turning the temperature down on a washing machine guarantees energy savings—good news for the environment and customer wallets.

Ariel developed a detergent that’s as effective in cold water as in warmer water, but its challenge was to convey this to consumers, reassuring them their clothes would get just as clean. Ariel placed its logo on an image of a washing machine dial that mirrors the act of turning the temperature down, visually reinforcing the “Turn to 30°C” message.

In another aisle altogether, Crest Vivid White transcends its health-care category, appealing to consumers as a cosmetic. The toothpaste brand stands out from others with distinctive, clean, vertical

packaging and uses beauty cues to communicate its smile-brightening benefits.

This tactic has proved successful: In the first three months postlaunch, sales of Crest Vivid White exceeded the company’s expectations by nearly 300 percent, and trial and repeat were up 187 percent and 129 percent, respectively, versus the forecast.

CLOSING THE DEAL

When considering a redesign, it’s important to evaluate a package’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to the three principles outlined above: Are you being seen? Understood? Are you wanted?

Marketers and brand managers often rush into drastic design changes in an effort to beautify or differentiate their product without analyzing the strengths of the original package. Identifying the key equities is crucial to avoid damaging loyalties and already-established positive associations. In other words: You don’t want to alienate your faithful customers.

With an overwhelming multitude of options, shoppers expect a lot more from their purchases. Not only do they demand innovative design, they’re picky about product quality and functionality.

One advantage of their higher standards? Being more selective also translates to a willingness to give new products a chance. Shoppers will try a product once to see if their criteria are met, and if not, they may never buy it again. This means one chance to impress—but only one.

Hello, new Caroline. Every Monday, on her way home from work, Caroline goes to the supermarket to stock up on supplies. She races through the bright aisles scanning the shelves for her favorite things. Her eyes dart across rows of colorful products—some familiar, others not so—and once in a while a particularly intriguing package may catch her eye.

She’ll pause from deleting items from the grocery list typed into her iPhone and examine the label. “Cool design, wholesome ingredients, and, hey—helps decrease stress,” Caroline thinks as she places the new product (perhaps your company’s product?) in her cart and hurries to the next aisle. ■



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