CONSUMER ACCEPTANCE OF NEW PACKAGING CONCEPTS

W. R. YOUNG
NORTH CAROLINE STATE UNIVERSITY

Several months ago, my good friend, York Varney, asked me to deliver this talk. He gave me as the subject, "New Packaging Concepts". This was fine and acceptable and I started contacting various packaging firms in regard to the new types of packaging that they were introducing and might even be planning to introduce.

Then I received a letter from York to the effect that the subject matter had been changed to "Consumer Acceptance of New Packaging Concepts." Well, believe me, if you will take a moment to think about it, the rules of the game had been changed. In fact, I'm not certain that it is the same game at all. If I had had all my faculties of good sense at that moment, I think that I would have politely turned York down. However, here I am and here you are.

In my research I found that libraries are full of information on design of packages. However, this is typically interpreted as design of the artwork, and I have been looking for information regarding the acceptance of the physical package . . . not the ink that is on the package but the acceptance of the size, texture, shape, construction and materials from which packages are made. Experts will tell you that research should be done on a new design but neither they, nor the manufacturers of packaging materials appear to be willing to report anything but favorable information as to which new packages have been successful. It is easy and perhaps good advertising for a packaging manufacturer to report that a given package in a given market has increased sales by some given percentage. But the same producers of packaging are most reticent about reporting failures of new packing concepts.

The 7th Du Pont consumers buying habits study made in 1965 indicates that although a dietary staple, most meat and poultry purchases depend upon some store decision. Actually, about 4 of 10 purchases were planned by type. 3 of 10 purchases were completely unplanned. Nearly 6 of 10 purchases were the result of some decision made in the store.

In this same Du Pont report, the purchases of processed meats showed even more spectacular statistics. And of course, it is in the area of processed meats that the greatest percentage of elaborate packaging is seen. These statistics show that less than 3 of 10 purchases were planned by brand and type. About 5 of 10 purchases were completely unplanned. Most significantly, more than 7 of 10 purchases were the result of decisions made in the store. Although I am neither an advertising executive nor a packaging salesman, I feel that we must concede that a good portion of these store decisions were made from the fact that the housewife was drawn to the product by the means of attractive packaging.

A current study by the National Live Stock and Meat Board discloses that the greatest frequency of complaints of housewives regarding meat was in the area of packaging. Specifically, homemakers complained of not being able to see the amount of waste -- fat or bone -- in a package.

This same study reiterates the fact that the new housewife is not familiar with the complete range of types of meats and thusly will not purchase a large proportion of meats unfamiliar to her because she does not know how to prepare them. This bears out the too often repeated desire on the part of housewives to have recipes on packages.

Interestingly enough, this same group of housewives reported that 78 percent of them flatly rejected the idea of purchasing pre-frozen cuts of meat at their local retail food store. And yet, 87 percent of those covered by this study reported that they sometimes freeze fresh meat at home. Their complaints about pre-frozen meats centered around the facts that they couldn't be certain that the product hadn't been frozen too long and that they couldn't be certain of the quality of the product. The whole frozen food industry suffered from these concepts in the period immediately after the World War II when lower or questionable quality products which were packaged beautifully were found to be unacceptable and thus repeat purchases were not made. Attractive packaging may have produced the sale but the inferior quality of so many of the brands denied the producers the required repeat sales. The frozen fruit and vegetable industries appear to have recovered from their problems but it would appear from this report that the meat industry has not gained the confidence of the consumer as to frozen items.

Another facet of meat packaging is the repugnance on the part of the housewife toward the product sticking to the pulp type trays that are often used. This, plus the advantage of being able to see the product has contributed to the growing popularity of the clear plastic containers. This has been carried to a further stage by the fact that the "peek-a-boo bill" requiring clear trays and covering for fresh meat products has been proposed and perhaps in reality has been passed in New York City.

Carmon M. Elliott, Manager, Package Design Division, Eastman Kodak Co., says that in this decade merchandizers are learning again some old lessons that we seem to have forgotten . . . that you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar; that a whisper is often far more effective than a yell; that, as the French proverb has it, we don't like noise unless we make it ourselves. Designers are proving by the lavishly beautiful designs that are being produced that our packages can be spirited, alive, and aggressive without employing the tactics of the carnival barker. Consumers are proving that they are mature people by rebelling against poor taste, poor design, and gimmickry when they are offered something better. And manufacturers will have to prove that they respect the consumer's intelligence by offering something better . . . not only in their products but in their packages as well.

During the present period we are proving that our packages are our "silent salesmen" . . . and the best silent salesmen are the silent ones indeed and not the loud ones. Consumers desire packaging that bespeaks of quality. Producers who are truly proud of their products are sending them to market appropriately dressed . . . in packages whose own high quality bespeaks of the quality of their contents. But, by the same token, the producer must make certain that he isn't attempting to fool the public by inserting a lower quality product in a highly impressive looking package. The consumer tells us after the first purchase that she refuses to be fooled a second time.

Charlotte Montgomery of the Good Housekeeping Magazine says that she receives many times more letters about the packages things come in than about the things that come in packages.

Here is a list of the things that consumers can't understand in packaging.

Why use a clear glass jar in which to pack a product and then cover it up so completely with a wrap-around label so that you can't possibly see the contents?

Why pick slithery, slippery containers for things that the consumer almost invariably uses when her hands are wet or they can only use one hand; things like shampoo and bleach and weed killer and baby-care products?

The perennial beef about meat packers and bakers not both being able to count to ten so that wieners and rolls will come out even.

Housewives like reusable packages. Such packages please most women and make them feel thrifty, nifty and wise.

They like packages that are easy to open. Staples are difficult for women to remove; packages that are double-sealed and glued as if for a trip to outer space are infuriating. The pull strip which is being used more is popular because it makes it easy to open a package. Only the cost of using this device on low profit items has restricted its further use.

The housewife tells us that while the "average family" has 3.61 members, there are very few families with 3.61 people in them. The family of two wants, and should be able to find, packaging to suit its needs . . . and the family of six is also looking for the suitably sized package.

Food packaging, by its nature requires more product protection than most other types of packaging. Manufacturers and processors of food products are constantly being told by consumers and their spokesmen that their packages are too hard to open. This is especially true in the meat industry. However, you and I know that the meat industry is faced with the inexorable fact that perishable food products must be protected. Self service merchandising has added a new demand on meat packaging. Did you ever see a housewife pick up more than one bar of soap or can of beans before dropping it in her cart? But just watch her rifle through a display of identically branded and packaged sliced bacon before she makes her choice!

Several years ago, the Marathon Corporation, now a division of American Can, made movies with hidden cameras of shoppers, both men and women, picking out a package of bacon. While the film proved to be uproariously funny, it proved nothing as they were unable to find out what the shopper was attempting to locate.

It is an unfortunate truism that the package that opens easily at home also tends to be too easy to open in the store. Excessive handling proves this fact.

The magazine "Sales Management" made a survey among housewives. Some of the conclusions were as follows:

1. 75% think that there is too much advertising on packages and that the space might better be used for directions, descriptions, and recipes.

2. 60% said, "I know the brands I like, and the package does not matter".

3. 60% wanted packages that look nice on the table at home rather than only on the store shelf.

4. 67% wished packages came in more sizes and complained that they frequently had to choose between too much and too little.

5. 87% thought that manufacturers were trying to fool them by putting a little bit of merchandise in a big package.

6. 65% would like standard sizes for packages, which would make it easier to store them at home.

Burns W. Roper, a partner in Elmo Roper & Associates, states that "there's a greater appetite for art, for styling, for culture of all kinds in this country than at any previous time in our history". And in the same talk before the American Marketing Association Mr. Roper cited examples that without research, management can often go far astray in their estimates of what kind of package design would be attractive to the consumer public.

In one Roper survey four proposed designs for labeling and packaging for a brewer were consumer tested. Three of the designs were conventional. One was considered to be "off beat". Management was sure that the public would never accept the "off beat" design. But in the consumer test, the "off beat" design won hands down.

No one can dictate a single "best approach" to product and package design testing, Mr. Roper said.

In my research, I found all kinds of analyses of packaging. I even found a Freudian analysis of packaging which I will not attempt to enlarge upon at this time.

However, one very interesting analysis involved the acceptance of different styles of designs to different income groups. The lower income group prefer designs that we would accept as representative of the gay 90's. You know, the gaudy, colorful geegaws that you would associate with that era. And I don't know why . .

The highest income group chose the cold, almost geometric designs. These are to be bold, clean and angular with no pictorials nor anything to disrupt the geometric design. And I don't know why . . .

The large middle income group came through in their preferences with the type of designs that emulate or illustrate family life, warmth, sort of the togetherness approach, all in warm colors that produce "comfortable" designs. And I don't know why . . . And as far as my reporter could find out, no one else knows why!

To substantiate these findings, Lippincott & Margulies state that "Consumer responses to design, though not rational, are nevertheless predictable". And further, "The consumer can . . . and does . . . react to a given design, but is almost totally inarticulate when it comes to talking about design in the abstract."

Numerous studies have shown that the claim of a "new" or "improved" product can be reinforced in no more powerful way than by a change in design which signals this fact visually to the consumer. Because the package is new, the consumer assumes that an improvement has, in fact, been made in the product itself.

Sometimes, however, an ideal package is introduced with a wrong concept. This is illustrated by the dismal and complete failure a few years ago by most of the major dentifrice manufacturers when they introduced aerosol toothpastes. It failed for many reasons but the most significant one was that everybody seemed to feel that an aerosol container just didn't suit toothpaste; it was too bizarre, too different, somehow just not right.

The package was good but the concept was poor. It was poor because for all its consumer-oriented pretensions, it was not really consumer oriented.

Too often the question can be raised: Who is the package really designed to please? The machinery maintenance man? The stock clerk? Or the consumer?

Numerous packaging suppliers have oriented themselves toward the consumer products of their customers, rather than toward traditional segmentations, packaging materials and containers. These suppliers, adequately staffed so as to commit themselves through research, will undoubtedly become the leaders in this field of consumer packaging. The importance of this commitment is well illustrated by the fact that new products are hitting the market places of the U.S. at the rate of 26 per day (and failing at a rate close to 23 per day). Thus management needs more and better facts than ever before if it is to avoid the costly experience of product failure. This means more and better product development research; more and better market, media and copy research. And, to surround management decisions with safety, more and better design research.

I appreciate greatly your kind attention. I hope that this dissertation has perhaps given you some little additional insight into the problems of making the consumer happy through the medium of packaging.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to be with you.

- - - - - - - - - - - - -