

Unwrapped: The new rules of packaging

Digital changes everything. Not just the way we market our products to consumers but, increasingly, the look and feel of the products themselves. Pinaki Dutt considers how the packaging of the future can upgrade the packaging of the past.

As e-commerce becomes an increasingly dominant part of the consumer purchase journey, brands need to do more than just adapt their packaging to look good on screen; they need to rethink its purpose full stop. To take a simple analogy, let's think about our personal packaging for a second: our business cards. In the pre-digital era, the trusty business card would have been the first thing you packed for a meeting. Now there are so many ways to provide contact details cards have been all but abandoned. Product packaging is facing a

similar crisis of existence. In the pre-digital world, it was used to convey promotions and product positioning, attract consumers and help brands differentiate themselves from their competitors. But at a time when more consumers are buying products and groceries online – in 2016, global FMCG sales via e-commerce grew 26% versus in 2015 and continues to rise – packaging has only two functions: to protect and preserve the product inside and make it easily transportable. Indeed, Brandless, an online supermarket in the US, sells exclusively own-brand products with simple descriptive packaging designed primarily to keep its contents safe to eat. Going further, Skipping Rocks Lab, a sustainable packaging start-up in London is promising to make packaging disappear entirely. Its first product, Ooho, is an edible water bottle. Its spherical packaging made of seaweed is entirely natural and biodegradable. To overcome this existential crisis, marketers need to find a new purpose for their physical packaging and work out how to evolve it to serve their brand in an online environment. But where to start? Brands should consider the following options:

Design e-packaging: Ironically, the same technology that has made physical packaging redundant can also make it more powerful and personal again. Brands just need to consider how ‘packaging’ has changed online. Let’s define ‘e-packaging’ as any combination of text and visuals that represent a product online – either in a 2D environment (like a supermarket website) or in 360-degrees.

These words and pictures are what ‘package’ your products online, so they need to be optimised for e-commerce environments. At a basic level, this could mean making sure images work better on screen and using fonts and colours that stand out in these cluttered spaces.

At a more sophisticated level, this might mean rethinking a product’s online descriptions to respond to the cultural needs of key markets. In Japan, for example, physical packaging includes power claims (e.g. food that is ‘100% natural’). As MediaCom’s Cultural Connections study reveals, Japanese consumers crave knowledge and want proof a product will work before they buy it, so it’s crucial these details appear online too. In China, on the other hand, power claims are less important. In this market, consumers are more curious and vain. They are drawn to packaging that is big and visually striking; size is important. Online representations of these packs need to be similarly bold, maybe using

innovative graphics and visuals to grab attention.

Take on the sceptics: Secondly, you need to be braver about using e-packaging to address misconceptions about your products. In a world where protests and misinformation live online, you can use your owned spaces to counteract such messages, like addressing a public concern in the description of your e-commerce listings. Take, for example, a product falsely perceived to be encouraging obesity; the e-commerce listing could include a clear reference to its calorific content and the need to consume as part of a balanced diet. Right now, few brands use e-commerce sites as part of their armoury for getting facts into public space.

Bring the shelf to the e-store: Thirdly, you need to deliver the same supermarket shelf standout experience on desktop, laptop and mobile. One way would be to work with e-commerce platforms directly to test and learn new features on their websites ahead of your competitors. This might include changing the colour scheme on a product page. If you were looking to promote your product's eco-friendly credentials, for example, you might want to colour this page green, or even include pictures of trees in the background. Think of it like changing an in-store display. How can you dress up the digital space around your products to reflect what you are selling? Your media agency can help you negotiate opportunities with e-commerce platforms.

Adapt your packaging by user: Fourthly, you need to flex your messages to whoever's receiving them. As MediaCom's eye-tracking research in China reveals, men and women read online information differently, so you should personalise your brand pages. Consumers are almost always logged in to e-commerce sites so it's not farfetched to think about using this data to adapt page design. In the next few years, we might see e-commerce platforms let brands produce occasion-based packaging. Maybe by offering special packs when their data tells them a big moment is coming up in a consumer's life (a birthday, for instance), or by offering personalised physical packaging.

Enhance your green credentials: Even in an e-commerce world, there are opportunities for physical packaging to become more responsible. FMCG brands, for example, could

enhance their packaging with QR codes, which direct consumers to their nearest recycling point.

Create packs that connect: There is also scope to use physical packaging as part of the connected home. You might think about including Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) or similar technology into your physical packaging to create a feedback loop with a consumer's smart home technology, for instance. This would allow you to anticipate future orders (and help you manage your supply chain), or enable you to send reminder messaging for consumers to reorder (for example, when the milk is about to hit its sell-by date).

Think out loud: We live in a world of Alexa and other voice assistants. But when a consumer asks to learn about your product, what will they hear? Beyond images and product descriptions, increasingly, your e-packaging will need to contain compelling complementary audio content too.

Ultimately, the rise of e-commerce doesn't mean the death of packaging, but a rebirth. Key elements of the design are unlikely to change – no one is talking about killing off the Energizer Bunny – it's just that the way they are used will evolve. After all, to return to our original analogy, in Japan – one of the most tech-driven markets in the world – the business card is still a vital part of the personal exchange when meeting for the first time.

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