

Packaging: the definitive consumer interface

 By [Graham Taylor](#)

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Follow the pack and fade into the background. Create your own distinctive identity and fly high above competitors. Every brand and product speaks to consumers in a different language.

When cruising shopping aisles, consumers have expectations as to what they should find in various sections. Wholesome, earthy colours and an abundance of wheat sheaves and grains on the packs, generally means you're close to the cereals or health foods. At a push you'll be in the biscuit section. In the same way, a profusion of blue, white and red, dynamic italic type with highlights and sparkles, space age graphics circa 1970 and yellow flashes, signifies you've strayed into the detergents aisle.

In some ways this helps us find our way through the visual pollution of today's retail environment, but does little to help us understand the dynamics of what we're looking for, and what differentiates the various products we see on shelf. To the detriment of many brands it appears that louder has become better, whilst distinction and differentiation have fallen away.

In the cosmetics sector, there has been a move towards packaging products in metal tubes and glass jars reminiscent of a chemistry laboratory. This demonstrates some smart strategic thinking behind the packaging to provide consumers with plain-speaking messages of basic ingredients and scientific formulas. But such examples are few and far between. For the most part products, however loud they are, merely blend into the background noise of their various competitive segments. Commoditisation by any other name, but simply a lot louder.

Strong branding, quality association, and occasional added value, will assist in breaking through the clutter by communicating a single-minded message that goes beyond the product's intrinsics and provides real differentiation. In reality it is extremely difficult to achieve true differentiation at this level.

Innovation is often the answer, but there is very fine line between being too clever and causing consumer irritation and coming up with a good idea that is both practical and eye-catching. Examples that come to mind are all those products from liquid hand soaps to moisturising creams that come in convenient little pump packs. Now don't get me wrong, these are indeed very convenient and user friendly, but have you ever tried to get the last drop out? It's one thing when you're dealing with an inexpensive soap, but quite another when it comes to expensive moisturiser.

Another irritant is the 'exciting' new upside down bottle of dishwasher. The logic is great, particularly as we've always turned these bottles upside down when the level gets towards the end. Some shampoos and conditioners even come with flat lids these days to make it easier. But where it fails is with the fancy valve that advertising tells us even a child can use. It simply doesn't work. It gets all gummy and sticky, and however much one rinses and cleans it there inevitably remains a smudgy

little puddle beside the sink. Not the greatest reflection on a brand that has become a household name.

Amongst the multitude of brand 'experts' that abound today, few understand the simplest concept - brands need distinctiveness and personality, differentiating them from competitors, to persuade their target market to identify and make a purchasing decision. Whatever you're purchasing, bland brand choices do little to help. Filling up with Shell (in spite of all those 'waves of change') is no different from fuelling with BP or Caltex. Skip may cost marginally more than Omo, but there is not much to prove it's really going to make a difference to the week's laundry.

Is there a solution? Too damned right there is! We must give more thought to what really makes our brands and products different and spend less time trying to outplay competitors at their own games. Being different is often as simple as being yourself. We must find out what this really means, and then tell people about it. There are so many things that differentiate South Africans that it is relatively simple to apply these diverse factors to our brands and products. The truth of this lies within each brand, product, and person, and by exercising a more self-confidence we will find our core differentials.

Whilst packaging is important and is the definitive point of consumer contact, it is only one aspect of a total brand experience. Success or failure of a brand is determined by factors ranging from formulation and pricing to distribution and availability, and from point of sale and advertising communication, to packaging. The total experience requires complex and careful management at all levels to succeed on a sustainable basis.

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