

inclusive design education resource

smallprint:

improving visual pack information for older consumers



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Research Associate:

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Research partner:

Packaging Solutions Advice Group

Year of completion: 2000

introduction

A project which explores the relationship between mandatory (legally required) and marketing (brand sales) information on packs, with the aim to devise a strategy to make packs easier to use for older consumers requiring information about ingredients, product instructions, dosage etc. Should information design take precedence over brand imagery on supermarket packaging?

next: challenge >>

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smallprint: improving visual pack information for older consumers

challenge

Supermarket packaging is all around us. During an average visit to a store, we will see 30,000 products within 30 minutes. The packs themselves contain more legally required information in the 'small print' than ever before. They must list ingredients, name of manufacturer, place of origin, net weight, nutritional values and instruction for use as well as warnings on the environment, GM (genetically modified) content and allergies.

For older consumers, mandatory information of this kind is especially important in the context of maintaining a balanced diet or taking medication. Yet back-of-pack 'small print' is often an afterthought. It is given less design attention than front-of-pack brand imagery. It is reproduced in sizes, formats and concealed locations that make life very difficult for an ageing population with deteriorating eyesight.

The challenge is to explore ways in which the UK packaging design industry can become more inclusive in meeting the needs of older consumers by taking 'small print' on the back of packs more seriously. Is a pure information design-led approach the way forward - or is strong brand imagery still the driving force?

next: research partner >>



The front-of-pack brand imagery of Heinz Tomato Ketchup takes precedence over the small print giving nutritional information





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research partner

The PSAG (Packaging Solutions Advice Group) was set up in 1996 to provide information and advice about all aspects of packaging to designers and their clients. It is made up of leading players in the UK's packaging supply chain - all experts in their specialist fields. Corus, Decorative Sleeves Ltd, Gilchrist Bros Ltd, Merck (Pigments), The Packaging Development Company, RPC Containers, Tag Labels and Victor International Plastics contributed to this study. Given the different pack materials and technologies used across the PSAG, the study of visual information on packs constituted a generic theme common to all the different members.

A key objective was to give the PSAG an authoritative 'voice' on an issue of social and demographic change which large retailers and brand managers are beginning to see as a major challenge.

next: methodology >>



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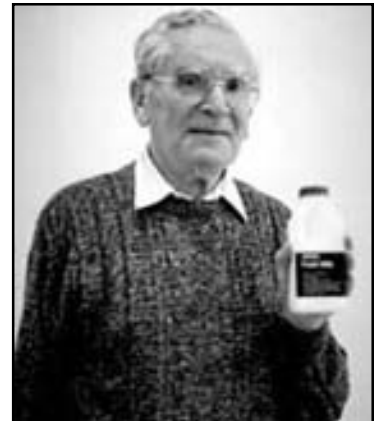
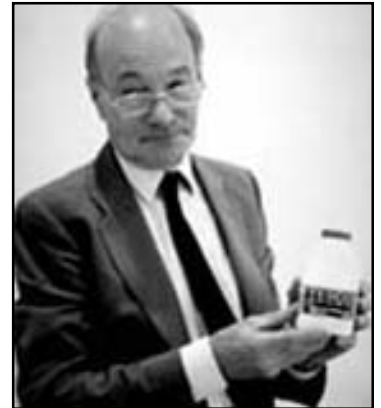
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methodology

The Research Associate studied typography as 'the packaging of information' and analysed good practice in terms of size, fonts, leading, spacing, alignment, contrast, icons, tables, printing materials and technology. He isolated existing 'small print' solutions from their pack context, to highlight their visual deficiencies.

A user group of 12 older consumers (all over 65) drawn from the University of the Third Age was convened to give opinions on the redesign of two supermarket products: Fresh Milk and Paracetamol. The Research Associate redesigned the packs purely for 'small print' legibility with no brand imagery. The information was presented 'democratically' through consistent size: 10 point Univers, all aligned left. The generic product name was set in 24 point to allow it to stand out within a supermarket context. By ridding the pack of 'advertising', space was gained which made it possible for more information to appear on the front of the packs. In each case (Milk and Paracetamol) the user group was asked to choose between nine options: eight existing brands plus the proposed design.

next: results >>



Older consumers from the University of the 3rd Age study the new-look packs

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results

The results showed that although the proposed milk redesign was relatively successful (50% of the user group chose it), people did not really trust it due to the absence of a brand. The clarity of the design translated itself into a cheapness. The absence of a brand name on the Paracetamol box was crucial, as nobody (0% of the user group) was willing to choose the pure information-led design. The general feeling was that, although clear, it could not be trusted. One participant expressed the general feeling by saying: 'Never heard of it, could be a dodgy import.'

The Research Associate then took the packs through a further design iteration, reinserting logos of existing super- markets and enlarging the titles. On the milk pack, a richer blue used. The Paracetamol pack became white with two different kinds of blue in an effort to avoid associations with cheapness and suggest a more serious medical look. A decorative element was introduced (light blue circles representing tablets), although this still retained an informative quality. This time, 75% of the user group chose the redesigned 'branded' milk pack (in comparison to 50% before) and more than 80% chose the new-style 'branded' Paracetamol (0% before).



A pure information designed approach on the Paracetamol pack won zero consumer trust



A halfway house combining Paracetamol brand image with better information design fared better



New-look milk cartons stress clearer communication

next: issues >>

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issues

The results showed that the whole issue of improving visual pack information for older consumers is much more complex than simply adhering to guidelines on legibility. The user group tests revealed that only an alignment of information design with brand strategy would win consumer trust - there was a point at which honestly conveyed information became unappealing.

The study showed that packaging contains two 'voices': a dominant branded sales voice which shouts from the front of the pack (the marketing information) and a marginalised consumer rights voice which is shunted off to the side and back of the pack (the mandatory information). Better solutions therefore depend on engaging in a moral argument about degrees of honesty and persuasion in pack design. The central conflict between advertising imagery and 'truthful' information in how we 'read' packs must be addressed.

Colours, images and words are all used to direct the way we perceive products. What makes them into information? And when are they simply advertising?

[next: projects >>](#)



Household products present famous brand imagery - but are consumers really being told the whole story?



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projects

brief 1

- 1/ Look at one Paracetamol pack and at one Coca Cola can. Separate the mandatory information (find out what that is) from all the optional marketing 'information' (such as branding, logos, additional info, images, etc).
- 2/ Compare the two kinds of information given on a pack in terms of style, visual impact, the space they take up on the pack, etc.
- 3/ Redesign the Coca Cola can and the Paracetamol pack applying the visual style of mandatory information to the optional 'information' and vice versa.

brief 2

- 1/ Document different warning icons/pictograms that can be found on packaging and compare them with each other in terms of clarity. Get various people's reactions (younger, older, men, women, British and non-British).
- 2/ Choose three of those warnings/icons, and compare how the design differs from each other on 10 different packs of different brands/supermarkets.
- 3/ Analysing the above, come up with the ultimate solution/icon/pictogram for that type of warning.

brief 3

- 1/ Document different types of 1 pint milk containers.
- 2/ Design a 1 pint milk container for the following groups of people:
a) a mother b) your grandparents c) a supermodel d) a body builder e) a child f) Stevie Wonder.

brief 4

- 1/ How are the products laid out in supermarkets? Document and analyse in terms of allocation. of product categories, reading information and physically accessing packs on the shelf.
- 2/ Based on the above, create a map/guide for the following people:
a) a mother b) your grandparents c) a supermodel d) a body builder e) a child f) Stevie Wonder.