How to Use Color in Food Packaging

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Introduction

When determining possible color options for a new product, packaging professionals must keep the consumer in mind. First, they determine what type of message the product should give. Based on the message, a color scheme that represents this message is chosen. This is why basic research is necessary, whether it's from previous case studies of similar products or from focus groups. Finally, packaging professionals must create an "attention" to the product, making it easily noticeable to the consumer. By following these basic steps, the package could be considerably successful. It may also instill a certain image or message into the consumer's mind that keeps them loyal for many years.

Understanding Color and its Importance

In order to be one step ahead of the competition and consumers, packaging professionals should research color schemes. Next, they must determine the exact demographics of the consumers they wish to target. Designers find this information useful and use it to decide on the package color.

The majority of packages today use characteristic color, which means that the color of the package is associated with the flavor. For example, an orange colored package is chosen to contain an orange flavored product. Uncharacteristic color would not be associated with the flavor. For example, an orange colored package containing a grape flavored product. The final scheme that is rarely used is ambiguous color, which means that the package conveys no color information at all. Examples of this are clear or colorless liquids (Garber and Hyatt, 318).

Color Lifestyle Groups

By determining the consumer demographics, packaging professionals can gain an advantage against the competition. This information can ultimately determine the main color(s) to be used on the package. There are three-color lifestyle groups that packaging professionals use; the Color Forward Group, the Color Prudent Group, and the Color Loyal Group. The Color Forward Group describes people who like to try a new color and will spend more for it, simply because it is new. Typically, women aged 30 to 50, men aged 30 and below, and all impulse buyers fall into this category. The Color Prudent Group will buy a new colored package only after observing someone else use it. These people are typically men and women aged 30 to 50, many of which can be described as careful shoppers. The Color Loyal Group tends to stick with safe colors, such as blue, black, and gray. People in this group are usually men over 60 years old and people who dislike shopping (Leichtling, 24).

Color Effects Consumers

After the importance of information regarding color has been described, one will have a better idea of color meanings. In food packaging, different colors can evoke different feelings and emotions in consumers. Packaging professionals must determine what message the product is intended to give off, and match color meaning with the product's message.

Color Meanings Change with Time

One thing to keep in mind is that color meanings change with time. Years ago, the color green was associated with vomit and other unpleasant images. However, today the meaning seems to have changed for the better, with green now seen as the color of nature. Green also tends to give consumers a feeling of healthiness. Consumers view green colored packaging as having fewer calories, more protein, and less fat. A few examples of green food packaging can be seen in Healthy Choice, meals and decaffeinated coffee.

Black is also another color whose meaning has changed with time. Years ago, black was simply related to death and depression. Now, black tends to convey a sense of elegance, wealth, and sophistication (Psychological Effects of Color, 2002). Although black is not very popular in food packaging, it is still used to make other colors in the package stand out. An example of this is the Mike's Hard Lemonade, package. Designers use yellow to characterize its lemon flavor, and also incorporate black into the label to signify elegance.

Color Meanings Change in Other Cultures

In different countries and cultures, colors have many different meanings. Just one color blunder could turn an entire country away from a specific product. A culture's distaste for a particular product due to its package can also lead to the consumer's dissatisfaction with the company itself.

Packaging professionals need to concentrate on this aspect even more now, especially because the U.S. faces far more ethnic diversity than ever before.

Examples of how Colors Differ in Different Cultures

Research has be done to determine what colors work and do not work in different cultures. For example, researchers have found that green tends to work well in the Middle East. On the other hand, it has been found that green packaging does not work well in China and France (Psychological Effects of Color, 2002). Green also does not work well in Egypt. This is because green is the country's national color, and consumers don't want this color used as disposable packaging (being consumed then discarded). A similar issue would be present in the U.S. if companies used American flag graphics on their disposable packaging. Most people probably wouldn't buy the product because they wouldn't want to throw the American flag, or its image, away. Another example is the color black in Hong Kong. Black lettering on a package would portray inferior quality (Leichtling, 27). Not all countries have the same views on color. This, in turn, makes packaging professionals work harder to cater to each country's needs.

Consumers' Product Views Change with Color

Packaging professionals have always known that different colors can evoke different emotions and feelings when used on certain packages; they only needed some solid evidence to support these theories. They hoped that by showing a focus group an original Gold Medal Flour, bag, along with eight different colored flour packages, they could prove that the group had different perceived views of the product, based solely on color.

This research took place during the mid-1990's, by a group of researchers, Garber, Burke, and Jones. They altered the color of the original package and created 25 new designs, including the original. They were eventually narrowed down to nine designs that would be ideal for a test. The text and graphics on the package was kept the same. However, the background color of the bag was changed. Next, the focus group was asked to indicate which of the nine all-purpose flours characterized each of the packages. They were told to base their assessments solely on package appearance. After the results were tallied, the original Gold Medal package was described as: good tasting, good value, naturally pure, and fresh quality. The black colored bag was identified as inexpensive, exclusively based on the color of the package. The focus group described the orange and yellow bags to be vitamin-enriched. The green bag was perceived to taste good. The light blue bag was identified as having been pre-sifted (Garber and Hyatt, 328).

This package study shows that large color changes to an existing package can increase the likelihood that new customers will consider the product for purchase. However, the package color must be consistent with the brand's original identity. The study shows the direct effect package color can have on consumers and their image of the product inside. Even though the product inside the Gold Medal Flour bag never changed, the individuals in the focus group identified numerous perceived meanings based solely on the new package color.

Products Fail with Wrong Package Color

When designing new packages for new products, designers must perform basic research before determining the package's final color scheme. As seen in the previous example, the color of the package alone can suggest different meanings to the consumer, regardless of the product inside.

For example, there was no color research conducted by PepsiCo, before Crystal Pepsi,, a new product, was put into stores. PepsiCo started to produce this new product without performing any focus group studies. They had no idea of how it would sell. Crystal Pepsi was a clear soda, unlike other regular PepsiCo products, which were dark in color. PepsiCo was simply trying to take advantage of a new package color phenomenon, clearness. Ivory, had originally started the fad with its clear dishwashing liquid. They had successfully changed the color of the liquid from creamy, milky white to clear. This drew in consumers due to its eye catchiness. It also gave them a sense of excitement toward a new version of the same original product.

PepsiCo believed that they could succeed with this clear visual marvel by rushing Crystal Pepsi into the market. However, PepsiCo had failed to

understand that color suggests more than sensory experience. In Crystal Pepsi (and other food products), color creates flavor and performance expectations. When consumers purchased the new Crystal Pepsi product, they expected to taste a product that had a light flavor and contain fewer calories than other cola drinks. Once consumers actually tasted Crystal Pepsi, they were immediately displeased when they found that it tasted just like regular Pepsi. The new product soon failed as consumers could not connect the flavor to the color (Garber and Hyatt, 313).

Cereal Popularity Depends on Color

After performing some basic research on the effects of color, it was interesting to see if package color had any effect on cereal sales and which colors were the most popular among cereals. Because most people eat cereal, it was chosen as the product of research due to its large sample size and popularity.

Typically, blue is not found in food packaging because people want to associate the color of the package with the color of the product. Aside from berry-flavored products, there are not many products that use blue as its characteristic color. I believe that blue is also a popular choice in cereals because companies need their product to stand out against their competitors. Not every cereal flavor can have the popular, attention getting colors like red, yellow, and orange. Blue gives the cereal packages an additional way to stand out against the other brands.

Yellow is another popular color found in cereal packaging. One of the most popular brands that use this color is Cheerios. Yellow is the fastest color the brain processes, and therefore is usually a good attention getter. It is also an appetite stimulant and tends to make people feel cheerful and optimistic (Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter, 1999).

Another color that can often be found in cereal packaging is red. Red tends to make people feel excited, full of energy, and can actually increase the heart rate. Like yellow, red is also an appetite stimulant. According to Eric Johnson at the Institute for Color Research, when the eye sees red the pituitary gland sends out signals that make the heart beat faster, the blood pressure increase, and the muscles tense (Supermarket Psych-Out, 1999). These are all psychological changes that can lead to the purchase of a product. Red is also said to be a "warm and inviting color," according to Paul Break, a Boston-area product designer. Other popular examples of red food packages include Campbell's soup, Marlboro cigarettes, and Folgers coffee.

Top Cereal Sales

The top five selling cereal brands in 2000 were (in order), Cheerios, Frosted Flakes,, Honey Nut Cheerios, Frosted Mini-Wheats, and Raisin Bran, (The Top 10 Cereal Brands, 2001). Each of these brands uses one of the top five used colors as their package color: yellow, blue, orange, red, and brown, respectively. This example shows product longevity and how it can relate to package color. Other brands that have tried to imitate or copy these best selling products usually never make it and become discontinued. Today, even mak-

ers of the generic brands of these products tend to copy the best-sellers color scheme, simply because they know it works well.

Conclusion

When choosing packaging options for new or current products, packaging professionals need to look at the package through the consumer's eyes. Certain colors evoke certain emotions and send out meanings. When used correctly, the color scheme could noticeably boost a product's sales. However, when a color scheme is used incorrectly, the product could end up a complete failure. Also, colors do not possess the same meanings in all cultures. By performing some type of basic research on the preliminary design, packaging professionals will be able to have a better idea of what will and will not work. Finally, with competition among brands so close, packaging professionals need something to give them an edge over the competition. By following these simple guidelines, package color can be that edge. At the end of the design process, one will have a package that will stand out, rise above the opposition, and keep the consumer coming back for years to come.

References

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