

Distinctive elements in packaging (FMCG): an exploratory study

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Abstract

This research sets groundwork for incorporating concepts from the branding managerial perspective into the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) environment. We undertook our study in a busy supermarket to capture the ‘top of mind’ packaging elements that helped shoppers select a product. 115 in-store interviewees ranked the important packaging elements for one product in their cart as: colour, brand name, logo, font-style, and picture. We also found that colour and brand cue differed depending on whether or not consumers classify a brand as their favourite in the category. An experimental approach under the light of memory and recognition is the next step to follow for further research.

Keywords: Packaging, distinctiveness, elements, branding, memory, retail.

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Introduction

The branding literature indicates that distinctive elements can be used to evoke the brand in different promotional platforms: print and TV advertising, radio, Internet, billboards, packaging and others. It has been documented that the most distinctive element that a brand can have is a 'Distinctive Asset' (DA) - a non-brand name element(s) uniquely linked to the brand in the memory of the vast majority of consumers. A DA must evoke one brand, and only that brand, without prompting, for close to 100% of consumers (Romaniuk and Hartnett, 2010).

It is believed that DA(s) are activators of connections between the brand and consumer memory, so that activation incorporates the branded product into the consumer's choice set at the moment of choosing or buying (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004a). The theory of DA focuses on the importance of unique identifying characteristics and not unique selling propositions. If a distinctive element is developed into a DA, it makes it easier for consumers to notice, recognise, recall and buy the brand (Sharp, 2010).

The branding notion of DA works with the big picture, the managerial view, while packaging view must be embedded within the retail environment, because the package faces the challenge of embodying the brand and being the physical contact with consumers (Warlop et al., 2005; Zeithaml, 1988; Rossiter and Percy, 1987). These packaging differences incorporate new variables to the problem of distinctiveness; one of them is time. For example, almost 50% of shoppers spent five seconds or less at the point of purchase (Dickson and Sawyer, 1990), so a package has to be distinctive quicker than its competition and accurately identified.

Studying distinctive elements in packaging builds upon knowledge about human memory, identification and cuing. This is academically important as if these concepts are better understood from the packaging perspective, it may aid in appropriate tool development for package testing, branding and consumer behaviour. The packaging literature expresses that a full understanding of supermarket shoppers' information processing at the point of purchase has not yet been achieved (Dickson and Sawyer, 1990; Teichert and Schöntag, 2010).

Packaging design studies are relevant to industry and marketing knowledge as packaging represents a substantial investment for companies. Approximately 40% of marketing budgets are allocated to pack design (Millward Brown Market Research, cited in Campaign, 1997). So, a better understanding of packaging' distinctiveness is likely to assist marketers in pack design and aid consumers in decision-making, as well as, help producers and manufactures to take informed decisions about packaging changes and the legal protection of their packaging's assets.

Branding elements and the pack

Packaging has several tasks, including: cutting through the clutter to get consumers to notice/see the product; communicating marketing information; stimulating brand impressions; and providing various brand cues (Louw and Kimber, 2006). However, product choice involves time pressure and cluttered conditions as consumers are looking for anything that helps them navigate their way through the 'noise' of the category (Rushton, 2006). People cannot process the huge number of messages they are bombarded with (Jugger, 1999), but elements such as colour, and package shape have been suggested as a means of creating distinctiveness (Gaillard, 2007). Previous research in branding found shape, colour, logo, slogan, font, taste, texture, scent, character, celebrity, music, sound and advertising style as

potential DA(s) to be used across different communication platforms (Gaillard, Romaniuk, Sharp, 2005; Gaillard, Sharp, Romaniuk, 2006; Romanuik and Sharp, 2004b).

This exploratory research sought to identify elements that make the brand stand out on the shelf, with relevance to the managerial level of branding and pertinence to the operational level of packaging. Therefore, this paper provides a first look at distinctive elements within the packaging context using the branding classification of potential distinctive elements as postulated by Gaillard (2007) and Romanuik and Sharp (2004b).

Methodology

Supermarket interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 115 consumers, over five consecutive days (including a weekend). For each survey, respondents (aged from 18 to over 65) were asked to discuss the elements of a pack they had just purchased, initially without looking at their trolley. The interviewer selected the product category randomly, since previous studies across different brand elements and packaging showed only a minor variation in distinctive elements among different brands and product categories (Gaillard, 2007; Romaniuk et al. 2007).

We used the online survey software Qualtrics on iPhones for real time data collection (responses were saved automatically during the interview). Distinctive elements were not prompted during the survey as can be seen from the three core questions:

- 1.) I see that you have bought ____ (i.e. a box of cereal or a loaf of bread). Without looking at your trolley, I would like you to visualise the pack of that product as best as you can. Could you tell me what is the most important element of the pack that helped you to identify that brand?
- 2.) Which is the second most important element of the pack that helped you to identify that brand?
- 3.) Which is the third most important element of the pack that helped you to identify that brand?

To ensure quick interviews, so that shoppers would be more likely to participate, the questionnaires were populated with response sets drawn from the branding literature. The elements included in the standardised response sets were: characters (e.g. cartoons, mythical people, celebrities); colour; font style; location of the pack on the shelf; logo; pack shape; pictures (e.g. photos, drawings, images); slogans (e.g. wording, taglines); texture/materials; music/sounds and smell (Gaillard, 2007; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004b). Options also considered were: other; I don't remember any element; I don't remember the brand; and I don't know. Brand name was included in the list of options in order to measure the percentage of people who say they rely on it to identify the pack.

Results and Discussion

80% of interviews were conducted with females and 20% with males. Close to 80% were married and live in a family of three to four members and with one to two children under the age of 18. These families shop mostly weekly or monthly at this store. Their pre-tax yearly income was generally above \$50,000.

Table 1 shows the list of the elements respondents selected as the first, second and third most important elements before visualizing the pack. We gave a score of three if an element was chosen as the most important, a score of two if it was chosen as the second most important, and a score of one if it was the third most important.

Table 1: Importance scores of distinctive pack elements

Elements	Frequency Selected	Average Score	MAD*
Colour	62	2.53	0.30
Brand name	53	2.42	0.18
I don't remember any elements	26	2.08	0.16
Logo	20	1.85	0.38
Font style	14	2.07	0.16
Picture	13	2.15	0.08
Location of the package	13	2.00	0.23
Other	12	1.58	0.65
Slogan	7	2.14	0.09
Shape	7	1.86	0.38
Texture/materials	5	2.60	0.37
I don't remember the brand	5	2.40	0.17
Characters	4	1.75	0.48
Music/sounds	0	na	na
Smell	0	na	na
Weighted Avg.		2.23	.24

* Mean Absolute Deviation

The second column shows the frequency of the responses: colour, brand name, “I don’t remember any elements”, logo, font style, picture and location of the pack. These results are consistent with the literature of branding and packaging (Gaillard, 2007; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004b). Though colour and brand name were similar in importance, colour had a higher deviation, suggesting it was essential for some consumers but not as important for others. Logo, location, shape and texture, similarly had higher absolute deviations. The answer: “I don’t remember the elements” was in the top three responses, it suggests that is very difficult for consumers to articulate their reaction to elements and verbalise distinctiveness, as shown by Gofman, Moskowitz and Mets (2010), Gaillard (2007) and Kauppinen (2004). This implies that for further research other methods to measure distinctiveness must be considered.

After answering the main questions, consumers were asked to look at the pack and see if it matched with their visualisation; 90 % agreed it did match their visualisation. The respondents were asked if the brand chosen was their favourite. The majority of consumers (74%) considered the brand their favourite.

We found a difference in the most important element between those listing the brand as their favourite and those who did not. The favourite brand was identified more often by colour (45%) and less often by brand name (24%), while the non-favourite brand was identified slightly more often by brand name (35%) than by colour (30%). The non-favourite group also had a higher count of ‘nothing’ identifies the brand (15%) compared to the favourite buyers (6%). These results indicate the existence of familiarity as moderator of the importance of distinctive elements (Romaniuk and Hartnett. 2010; Macdonald and Sharp, 1996; Zeithaml, 1988; Rossiter and Percy, 1987; Geistfeld et al., 1977). Though this is a small sample, the research indicates that colour is a more important element for heavier users of the brand and acts as a key distinctive element, while lighter users continue to focus on the brand name as well as colour. The results also showed that a substantial proportion of people seem to have chosen the brand with no identifying element.

Conclusion and further research

From a branding list of 10 potential 'Distinctive Assets' just five of them were verbalised by consumers as relevant within the packaging perspective. According to consumers, the order of importance for these elements is: colour, brand name, logo, font, and picture. Colour appears to be the main element, but compare with previous studies our results got the relevance of elements in different order; for example, 'Location of the package' came out to be more critical than other elements often thought to be of higher importance, such as characters or shape e.g. (Garretson and Burton, 2005). These dissimilarities, as well as the finding that colour and brand name cue differently, depending on whether or not consumers classify a brand as their favourite, are things to consider for future studies of distinctiveness for packaging. This is especially relevant for the 'Stock Keeping Unit' level, where colours are often used to discriminate between different flavours or styles of a product (Gaillard, Sharp, Romaniuk, 2006; Kauppinen, 2004; Van der Lans, Pieters and Wedal, 2008).

Future research should test the above results using experimental approaches to obtain less biased feedback from consumers and consider less conscious reactions to distinctive packaging elements (Aribarg, 2010).

This paper is the first step to comprehend what makes a package easy and quick to find. The power of colour, brand name, font, and pictures/images in attracting consumers needs to be analysed. Some marketing research literature has recognised a lack of studies in this area in reference to attention and memory (Lee, Hu, and Toh. 2000; Kang, et al., 2003). Others have shown how brand, text, and pictorial elements can impact differently on consumer's attention (Pieters et al., 1999). They have also considered packaging conditions, as time pressure in brand choices, and reconfirmed that these retail conditions can cause a redirection of attention towards packaging elements as graphics and colour over text (e.g. Pieters and Warlop, 1999; Childers and Houston, 1984).

From different perspectives this problem is emerging; choice studies discuss about the positive impact of visual and graphical cues (Chartrand, 2005; Fitzsimons et al., 2002). Brain exploration has proven that graphic elements are processed differently; for example, Tanaka (1993) assured that to recognize objects, the brain might have some overlapping, but slightly different sensitivities in the domains of shape, colour, and pattern. In experimental psychology, Cave et al., (1996) noted differences on priming/processing/recalling visual cues as: colour, shape and patterns. The implications of all these results are unknown in terms of packaging distinctiveness and buyer behaviour. Therefore the current challenge is testing which element or combinations of them (colour, font-type or pictorials) work faster at getting consumer's attention and accurate packaging/brand recognition and distinctiveness.

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