

# Package Design as Strategic Branding

Sanna Heinio

*International Design Business Management Aalto University School of Economics Helsinki, Finland  
sanna.heinio@hse.fi*

**Abstract:** The recent developments in consumer society have led to growing interest in packaging as a branding factor. Product package as a visual sign of brand features and product quality is a topical issue both for brand managers and product designers. Package has become an important marketing communications medium as the more traditional ways of marketing (such as mass-media advertising) have lost their grip on consumers and no longer provide the wanted results. In the first part of the paper, a literature review of product package as a visual sign of brand features is introduced. Package design is discussed both from design and branding (marketing) perspectives, and comparisons between these approaches are made. A model of six principles for effective packaging [1] is applied to cover both design and brand perspectives. In the second part of the paper, a case study of a European gift chocolate producer is introduced. The case study explores a package design project in which a multidisciplinary team created new packaging design concepts for a gift chocolate brand. The paper concludes that package design is a crucial element in strategic branding. It is illustrated that package design improvements require multidisciplinary teamwork including designers, brand managers and engineers. New package design concepts need to be innovative as well as fulfill requirements of being experimental, emotional, informational and functional for shoppers and product users. Finally, the problems in traditional package design process are discussed and ways to improve strategic brand building with package design are suggested.

**Keywords:** package design, brand, gift chocolate, strategy

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest towards packaging and especially on package design<sup>1</sup>. A consumer product package is no longer considered only a decorated carrier of a product, but package is more often understood as a strategic medium for brand communication. Expressive visual package designs are employed to support marketing communications and brand strategies especially in low-involvement consumer product categories, where product differentiation is more or less a necessity.[1,2,3] Trends in the packaging industry and the interest towards more expressive designs can be seen as reflections of contemporary consumer behavior and the emergence of new marketing ideologies. The developments of dream society [4] and experience economy [5] have led to new interpretations of the product concept, and success is increasingly dependent on the positive meanings and associations products communicate. [6,7,8]

Although package's crucial role at the point of purchase has been acknowledged since industrialization and the emergence of supermarkets [9], there can be identified three main reasons why packaging has remained a topical concern of marketing communications and branding decisions even today: *First*, given the amount

of brands in the market and the varied range that consumers find at the point of purchase companies are forced to differentiate their products. In cluttered markets a distinctive design of product package is an effective way to gain consumer notice. [2,10,11,] *Second*, it is estimated that the majority of product decisions are made at the point of purchase. When consumers are scanning packages on the store shelves, perception is rapid, and quick recognition is important for inclusion in the decision process. [12,13] *Third*, the traditional means of advertising have lost their grip on consumers. Consumers do no longer respond to audiovisual messages which they get an overflow of from all media channels. Given that consumers make most of their purchase decisions at the point of purchase, only a very few advertising messages stay in consumers' memory this far. [1,3,8] These features describe the current context of packaging and set the basis for packaging design objectives.

This paper explores the relationship between package design and strategic branding and seeks new insights for building brand strategies for packaged consumer products. First the relationship between package design and branding (marketing) is discussed on the basis of existing research and literature, and then the relationship is examined through a case study representing a European gift chocolate producer. Finally the complexities of package design process and brand management are discussed and ways to improve package design as strategic branding are suggested.

<sup>1</sup> Package design is generally understood as the visual appearance of a product package and having two basic components, graphics and structure [11]. In this paper, package design is defined as a composition of colours, shape(s) and graphics created by a designer.

## 2. Product Package as a Visual Sign of Brand Features

A walk in a supermarket is like enjoying a crosscut exhibition of good and bad packaging. In the best examples, a brand stands out from the competitors due to its unique package design. With a smart and visually appealing package design, brand is not just a packaged product on a shelf but it provides a unique solution to the needs of the shopper and user. In the contrary examples, a brand is not recognized or no attention is paid to it since the package design is just too diffuse or too conventional to be noticed.

Package needs to speak for the brand at the very crucial moment shoppers are scanning the different product options on the supermarket shelves. In addition to package's role as attention catcher in a supermarket (or other point of purchase), package design also needs to provide extra value for people interacting with it after the purchase situation. Therefore, package design is not just about gaining attention, but it is also strengthening the brand message and providing shoppers and product users extra value through experimental, emotional, informational and functional package qualities.

Since brands compete on shoppers' attention at the point of purchase, several studies have been carried out to understand how consumers respond to different packaging designs. Color is recognized to be the most powerful one of the package design elements (in comparison with shape and graphics). Colors help shoppers to categorize products and recognize brands especially among daily products<sup>2</sup>. Using a color as a cue can be potentially strong association, particularly when it is unique to a particular brand. Brand colors attract attention, evoke aesthetic response, and convey meanings on the product and product class. [8,13,14,15,16] In addition to colors, package design has been studied, for example, with focus on verbal and visual elements [17], graphic variables [15], and pictures [18]. The overall visual appearance of a package has also inspired researchers to conduct studies on how consumers choose between the different packages at the point of purchase [12,20,21]. Underwood [8] has explored the role of packaging as a part of brand identity and marketing communication. He argues that packaging communicates brand personality via multiple structural and visual elements and suggests that packaging is an essential brand communication vehicle. Also other studies [12, 13, 15, 16, 20] emphasize package's role in marketing and brand communication.

---

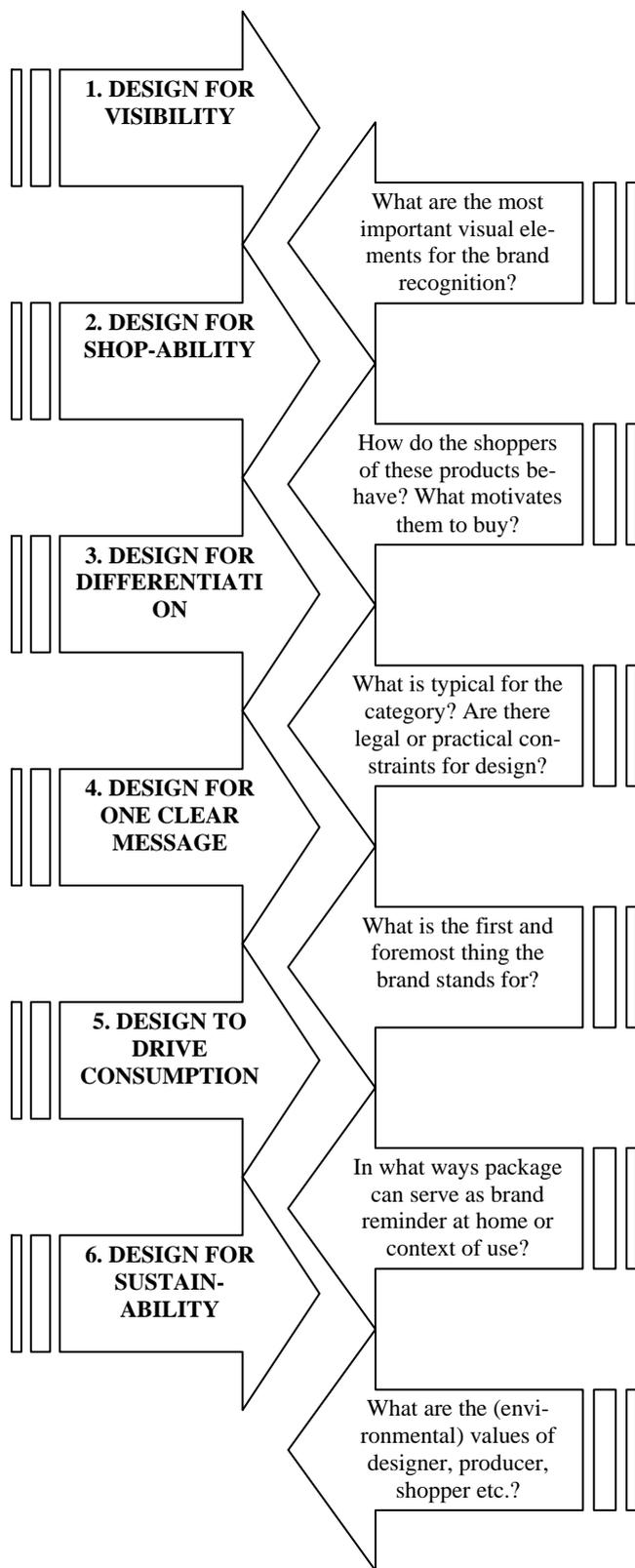
<sup>2</sup> Daily products sold in a supermarket are an example of low involvement products. A product is considered low involving when decision-making process is short and the product purchase is not very relevant (for that person).

## 3. The Six Principles of Effective Packaging

Young [1] outlines six principles for effective packaging to better address the needs of consumers (shoppers), and hence, build more competitive strategies for packaged consumer products. He argues that while it is not possible to reduce package design to a formula, there are several core principles consistently linked to successful designs. The six principles are: (1) Design for visibility, (2) Design for shop-ability, (3) Design for differentiation, (4) Design for a single clear message, (5) Design to drive consumption, and (6) Design for sustainability.

Good package design often means good branding especially for daily products. However, designers are not experts on branding and managers are not experts on package design. There are often misunderstandings on the package design objectives between package designers and brand managers, since they approach package design from different perspectives. While designers may be interested in finding new ways of expressing brand features in form of colors, typeface, illustrations, material choice, shape and usage mechanisms, brand managers generally place their focus on sales and brand recognition. This is not to say that design and branding always have different goals, but rather to suggest that in order to improve package design in an efficient way, more conscious cooperation between the two fields of expertise would be fruitful. The picture on the next page illustrates how the six principles for effective packaging [1] can be linked with brand perspective. Each design principle is evaluated from the brand context and brand strategy is worked together with package design process.

Design for visibility (1) stands for gaining attention at the point of purchase, but it is also important to consider the visuals that build brand identity and make the brand recognizable. Similarly, design for shop-ability (2) does not only mean providing shoppers an easy choice, but it also about giving shoppers a new reason (motivation) to buy a certain brand and. Design for differentiation (3) is probably the most pronounced principle of package design, but what differentiation means in a particular product category and in what ways brand is to be differentiated require careful analysis from both designers (visual experts) and brand managers (brand experts). Design for one clear message (4) is often forgotten in package design process since brand managers want to emphasize several features of a brand. Prioritizing the brand characteristics will help package designers to focus on the essential. Design to drive consumption (5) builds on the fact that package design is more or less a tool to sell a product better. Brand recognition is built rather in the usage context (typically home) than during a quick shopping tour. Finally, everything in a package (visuals, information, material, shape etc.) communicates about the company producing it. Design for sustainability (6) should no longer be an option but a must for everyone (designer, producer, shopper etc.) to consider.



**Picture 1:** Six principles of effective packaging and brand perspective, modified from Young [1]

#### 4. A New Package Design for a Gift Chocolate Brand

A European producer of chocolates wanted to improve their gift chocolate brand with a new design<sup>3</sup>. The brand management objective was to uplift the brand with a package design that would attract new customers in the increasingly competitive market. During the last decade, the European gift chocolate industry has become more diverse and the market has boomed for hand-made chocolate products that are sold in specific small boutiques. Following this development, factory-produced chocolates have been losing their appeal and the need to differentiate the gift chocolates with smart and aesthetic package designs is even a more crucial for brand success than it was few years ago.

In order to provide a solution to the challenging package design task, the six principles of effective packaging [1] were experimented in practice with a student team. A multidisciplinary and multicultural team of four master-level students was selected to give their package design solution for a gift chocolate brand. Since the team members had their undergraduate degrees in business management, marketing, engineering and graphic design, they were able to look at the package design challenge from various angles and aim for a holistic solution. The cultural diversity within the team was also an advantage since the gift chocolate brand was sold in various markets.

The team was given a brief by the brand management and they had the opportunity to interview in-house package design engineers as well as get a tour in the factory to see the packaging processes in practice. The students had two supervisors from the academia who were able to provide theoretical knowledge on design, branding and packaging. The mixture of theory and practice combined with the eagerness of the student team to show their skills for a remarkable company created a fruitful working climate for package design project.

The six principles for effective packaging [1] functioned as the key framework for the project. Each principle was studied both theoretically and empirically. Students read literature on the topics, had workshops and discussions with supervisors as well as learned from sharing and exchanging knowledge within the multidisciplinary team. The team conducted several interviews in the company, analyzed different gift chocolate packages and made market observations in three European countries. As a result of bridging theory with practice the new applied model on six principles for effective

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the company name or the new package design concepts cannot be shown in this paper. However, the case study is described in a best possible way to indicate the problems in the package design process and to explain why in the traditional approaches to package design do not allow strategic brand building.

packaging emerged (Picture 1). The applied model shown and discussed in the previous chapter builds a bond between package design objectives and brand management.<sup>4</sup>

Of the six principles, the team focused especially on principles two and three, design for shop-ability and design for differentiation. These principles were also emphasized by the brand management, since the other principles were more sensitive for change. The elements for visual brand recognition and brand characteristics (design principles one and four) were defined by the brand management and could not be modified. These were approached more as the foundation for the new package designs, rather than features to alter. The fifth principle, design to drive consumption, was considered in one concept which promoted a seasonal package design. Since the student team was environmentally-minded from the beginning, the sixth principle on design for sustainability was considered throughout the project. They considered sustainability a crucial value for packaging on the basis of their own values and what they had experienced in an international packaging trade fair.

Finally, the students considered the logistics perspective to package design: "Design for logistics". This was not mentioned in the Young's [1] model, but it became evident during the project that good package design also meets the requirements for secondary packaging and transportation.

The project resulted in two new package design concepts for the brand. The team had altered the shape, size and material of packaging<sup>5</sup> so that it could better serve the purpose (gift-giving) and the context of use. The new package concepts provided unique features for the brand to stand out from the competitors and to build a new niche for factory produced chocolates. One concept was a seasonal (Christmas) product, and the other, a more emotional and experimental expression of the brand's identity. Both concepts were very much appreciated and liked by the brand management. However, neither of the concepts could be placed in production since they were not possible to produce with the existing packaging machines.

## 5. Conclusion and Summary

This paper discussed the relationship between design and branding and how this relationship could be improved with more cooperational working process. The

<sup>4</sup> The applied model was constructed after the package design project which means that it was not used as such during the project. However, the multidisciplinary student team's work on package design task contributed to the idea of evaluating each design principle from branding perspective.

<sup>5</sup> The overall visual appearance and colors were kept similar to the existing version in order to maintain brand recognition.

applied model on Young's [1] six principles for effective packaging provides a framework for package designers and brand managers to work together towards common objectives. The package design process is generally conducted in a linear manner that does not allow much space for the brand to develop. A more profound cooperation between package design and brand management is therefore needed. In this way, there are better chances for new successful package designs to emerge.

However, just as was illustrated in the case study, even good package design solutions may face rejection due to technical preconditions. Even if the multidisciplinary team was able to provide innovative package design solutions that fulfilled experimental, emotional, informational and functional requirements of the gift chocolate brand, the concepts could not be taken into production. Therefore, the cooperation between designers, brand managers and engineers is not enough. Management commitment is also needed to make any packaging improvements real.

The case serves as an example of common phenomena within consumer product industry. Brand managers want to improve brand communication with more appealing and innovative package designs. Package design team is called to create new concepts that express the brand identity and provide shoppers and users a unique package experience. When the concepts are ready, technical preconditions for production are evaluated. In many cases, the new package concepts have to be placed aside since the current packaging machinery is not able to produce new innovative forms of packaging and investments on new machinery would be too expensive.

*"We often find that breaking the rules – with revolutionary designs that diverge from category's visual norms – is what creates differentiation and drives success."* [1] However, these rules cannot be broken as long as producers are dependent on current packaging technology. In the beginning of the case study it was expected that closer cooperation between designers, brand management and technical experts would provide the solution to better and more expressive visual package designs. The end result of the case study indicated that the problem was not so much between design and branding, but it was the technology that was limiting new solutions to become real.

As a conclusion it is summarized that package design and branding can go well together if the objectives are worked together by package designers, brand management, and technical experts. Principles of effective packaging should match with principles of effective branding in the product category. Still, cooperation between package designers, brand managers and engineers does not reach strategic level unless the whole company agrees on the strategic importance of packaging.

More research on managing the multidisciplinary aspects of package design process and more practical solu-

tions for integrating design, branding (marketing) and technology would be welcome. A package has several functions and in order to excel in those functions multidisciplinary ways of working are needed. Package design can serve as an excellent tool for strategic branding, but before the tool can be used it has to be taken seriously. Package design needs to be lifted from its inferior role as a decorated surface and understood as a strategic building block of brand strategies.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Toni-Matti Karjalainen, Kati Randell, Sari Alén, Maija Liiri, Antti Kivinen and JitanV. Pavel for your cooperation in the package design project. The project illustrated the complex nature of package design in a more extensive way than ever expected. I would also like to express my gratitude to all VIP (Messenger Package) partners who made this project, among other explorations in the world of packaging, possible.

## References

- [1] S. Young, "Designing for the shopper – Six principles for effective packaging", *Brand Packaging Magazine*, pp. 38–44, April 2008.
- [2] H. Meyers and R. Gerstman, *The Visionary Package – using packaging to build effective brands*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2005.
- [3] S. Young, "Breaking Down the Barriers to Packaging Innovation", *Design Management Review*, Vol. 15, pp. 68–73, Issue 1 2004.
- [4] R. Jensen, *The Dream Society*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999.
- [5] J.B. II Pine and J.H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999.
- [6] P.W. Jordan, *Designing pleasurable products – an introduction to new human factors*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2000.
- [7] M.E.H. Creusen and J.P.L. Schoormans, "The Different Roles of Product Appearance in Consumer Choice", *The Journal of Product Innovation Management*, Vol. 22, pp. 63–81, Issue 1, 2005.
- [8] R.L. Underwood, "The communicative power of product packaging: creating brand identity via lived and mediated experience", *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol.11, pp.58–68, No.1 2003.
- [9] J. Pilditch, *The silent salesman*. London: Harper and Row, 1961.
- [10] P.H. Bloch, "Seeking the Ideal Form: Product Design and Consumer Response", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 59, pp. 16–29, No. 3 1995.
- [11] T. Hine, *The Total Package*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995.
- [12] J. Clement, *Visual influence of packaging design on in-store buying decisions*. Dissertation. Copenhagen: Publications of Copenhagen Business School 2007.
- [13] H. Kauppinen, *Colours as non-verbal signs on packages*. Dissertation. Helsinki: Publications of the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration nr.139, 2004.
- [14] R.P. Grossman and J.Z. Wisenblit, "What we know about consumers' color choices", *Journal of Marketing Practice: Applied Marketing Science*, Vol. 5, pp. 78–88, No.3 1999.
- [15] O. Ampuero and N. Vila, "Consumer perceptions of product packaging", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 23, pp. 100–112, Issue 2 2006.
- [16] P. Silayoi and M. Speece, "The importance of packaging attributes: a conjoint analysis approach", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 41, pp. 1495–1517, No. 11/12 2007.
- [17] R. Rettie and C. Brewer, "The verbal and visual components of package design", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 9, pp. 56–70, No. 1 2000.
- [18] R.L. Underwood, N.M. Klein and R.R. Burke, "Packaging communication: attentional effects of product imagery", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol.10, pp.403–422, No.7 2001.
- [19] R.L. Underwood and N.M. Klein, "Packaging as brand communication: effects of product pictures on consumer responses to the package and brand", *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol.10, pp.58–68, No.4 2002.
- [20] U.R. Orth and K. Malkewitz, "Holistic Package Design and Consumer Brand Impressions", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 72, pp. 64–81, Issue 3 2008.
- [21] J.P.L. Schoormans and H.S.J. Robben, "The effect of new package design on product attention, categorization and evaluation", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol.18, pp.271–287, Issues 2-3 1997.