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Emerging Packaging Patterns

Consumer Insistence on Convenience Fuels the Future

"It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future," baseball legend Yogi Berra once quipped. While there's an element of truth to that amusing statement, educated forecasts are, in fact, not only possible, but highly important in guiding businesses.

With a proven track record in attracting consumer interest, convenient packaging is poised to assume even greater significance during the next few years, and the company leaders who realize what's at stake will be the winners. It's safe to say that the next generation of convenient packages will be created by companies who thoroughly understand current-package limitations and end-users' new needs.

Despite the innovations offered by companies during the last quarter century or more, it's really the consumers, not the inventors, who are driving and defining this segment. They often vote with their wallets and when they switch brands it's a sure-fire signal to brand managers that packaging changes need to occur.

For a package to be considered "convenient" today, it must offer more than simply being easy-to-use. It has to trumpet that quality. It must appear attractive to consumers by communicating brand identity, product quality and package content. It must exclaim "convenient" from a distance via graphics, bottle shape and package structure. A perfect example is Kraft's Grate-It-Fresh cheese dispenser. Studies indicate anywhere from 60% to 80% of purchasing decisions are made at the point of purchase. In these instances, the package itself is assuming the role of silent spokesperson for the product.

Of course, a convenient product, by definition, must be: easy to carry; trouble-free to hold when dispensing product, effortless to open and safely re-close; and offer problem-free storage.

Boomer impact

Demographic factors play a prominent role in convenient-packaging trends with two major consumer categories—baby boomers and generation Y—currently leading the charge in determining what hits the shelves. Boomers, who by far enjoy the biggest impact on package changes, are quite demanding when it comes to package functionality and appearance. For instance, the introduction of the new NutraGen II cap was prompted by this generation's need for a package that's easy to handle and open. By contrast, generation Y (and younger) consumers desire a package that makes a statement about the individual carrying it. This group's active lifestyle is changing today's package by giving it a more portable and

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Kraft's Grate-It-Fresh cheese dispenser, which includes a built-in-grater, represents a prime example of today's cutting-edge packaging.

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distinctive shape and convenient product-dispensing options. These individuals also value nature-friendly (“green”) packaging.

Aside from demographics, lifestyle and sustainability, the often forgotten element in the packaging picture is globalization and its effect on the U.S. consumer. As Americans gain greater exposure to diverse ways of eating, drinking and behaving, they will continue adapting different products and with that, different packaging types. This also ties into the green-packaging movement, already blossoming in Europe and sprouting in the United States. That movement most likely will prompt an effort to minimize packaging material and eliminate non-essential secondary packages.

In addition, an effort is under way to create a biodegradable package—including bottle, closure, seal and label—that will safely contain a product throughout its life cycle.

Moving the effort forward is Minneapolis-based NatureWorks LLC, which has created a PLA polymer the company advertises as “the world’s first greenhouse gas-neutral plastic.” This plastic is manufactured from 100% annually renewable sources, such as corn. Today, several companies use this plastic in their packaging, including: Winter Haven, Fla.-based juice company Noble; Wailuku, Hawaii-based water bottler Jivita; and San Francisco-based Del Monte Foods, which has featured the plastic in its fresh-cut produce product line since 2004.

The challenge presented by a polymer-composed package is that cradle-to-cradle solutions don’t exist to determine how to dispose of it. If placed in a regular landfill, the package won’t realize its biodegradable potential.

Despite all this eco-friendly activity, companies need to know that a product’s “green” status won’t guarantee strong sales all on its own. A fine balance needs to exist between environmental protection and package quality. Product managers must keep in mind that if a significant level of quality is sacrificed to make a product “green”-friendly, customers might be lost. The challenge for packaging manufacturers will be maintaining current quality standards while also making packages more environmentally safe.

Diversity is key

An element lacking in convenient packaging—and one that should prompt some significant changes in coming years—is ergonomic solutions. As the U.S. population ages, consumers will place in high demand those products that are easy to handle, carry and open. The 2000 census indicates nearly 50 million Americans have some type of long-lasting condition or disability. An effective dispensing feature is key to serving this substantial population segment, which will pay higher prices to obtain convenient packaging,



The new NutraGen II cap offers baby boomers a package that’s easy to handle, carry and open.

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whether it houses vitamins or medications.

Unfortunately, many current packages use identical dispensing closures, no matter what the individual characteristics of the product they contain, which can be as different as sauce or ketchup or honey. Honey's dispensing rate can be effectively controlled with squeezing motion. However, most honey bottles today are made of either glass or PET—neither of which is conducive to squeezing. On the other hand, a less viscous product (salad dressings, marinades, sauces or nutritional beverages) can use an elongated orifice to help control the desired dispensing flow. Consumers currently are offered one solution for all products, while they really want a package tailored to a specific product's dispensing attributes. The recently introduced LiquiFlapper closure system meets this need.



The LiquiFlapper closure system is the perfect combination of ease of use, shelf impact and safe and secure packaging for dispensing salad dressings, marinades and sauces.

All this focus on baby boomers certainly isn't meant to eclipse generation Y, which right now is under-represented in current packaging attributes. Despite the influence exerted by the boomers, the rising consumer power comes from generation Y. This generation enjoys a much larger disposable income than the same age groups in years past. Furthermore, product-perfection expectations (including inside *and* outside components) are very high. These young consumers know what's available and are extremely brand-sensitive, making packaging even more important.

Dispensing closures not only represent a value-added packaging component, their appeal spans generations. While closures might not play the most drastic role in the point-of-purchase product selection decision, they definitely contribute to building satisfaction and loyalty among consumers who've started using a product.

A baby boomer might value a dispensing closure because it eliminates the pain associated with unscrewing a cap; doesn't permit caps to be misplaced; and reduces product waste. By contrast, a generation Y consumer might find a dispensing closure convenient because it makes the product unique and conveys a sense of individuality to the user.

Whatever the differences in demographics, the common thread among all consumers will be a demand for convenient packaging. Marketers who are cognizant of what defines "convenience" not just today, but tomorrow, will be poised to reap the rewards.

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