

The rise and rise of packaging

By [Vivian Warby](#)

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Long gone are the days when packaging was a mere protector of a product. Today, with fierce market competition and shelf life at a premium, it has taken on a key marketing role, providing more than just functional benefits and information, said Alice Louw and Michelle Kimber of The Customer Equity Company, speaking on the Power of Packaging at SAMRA's 2007 conference held at Spier in Stellenbosch, Cape Town, last week.

The right (and hopefully environmentally-friendly) packaging, it is clear, can help a brand carve a unique position in the marketplace and in the minds of consumers.

Not only does it have a better reach than advertising but, it can set a brand apart from its competitors.

Pringles potato chips cylinder and the Absolut vodka bottle are widely cited international examples of different packaging, while in South Africa, recent examples include Clover milk easy pour packs (long-life screw top packs) and Country Fresh ice cream tubs.

Reinforces purchase decision

Not only at the point of purchase, but also every time the product is used, packaging promotes and reinforces the purchase decision, say Louw and Kimber.

Although a non-favourable advertisement might be quickly forgotten, poor packaging (if it remains with the brand throughout its usage cycle) provides a continual reminder of the brand's perceived failing. Likewise, favourable packaging can be a means of continually reinforcing the brand's appeal.

For products with low advertising support, packaging takes on an even more significant role as the key vehicle for communicating the brand positioning.

And packaging in different serving sizes can extend a product into new target markets or help to overcome cost barriers.

Packaging, said Louw and Kimber, can even drive the brand choice (especially in the context of children's products).

Under time pressure and in low involvement purchases, less time is spent looking at the detail and information provided on packaging.

Concept of gestalt

The limited research into packaging has found that different packaging cues impact how a product is perceived. Often the packaging is perceived to be part of the product and it can be difficult for consumers to separate the two (the concept of gestalt). Aspects such as packaging colour, typography, illustrations and graphics can influence how a product is perceived.

Typically, the most common form of measuring a package's effectiveness is to conduct focus groups or quantitative surveys. Usage tests and shopper behaviour research provide more contextual insight but can be more complex and costly to conduct.

While each of these methodologies has various pros and cons, there are several principles which should be guiding the way research is set up, say Louw and Kimber. These include:

- **Ask about the product:** As products and packaging influence one another, asking customers directly how they feel about a product or package is difficult for them to dissect. We should be asking the overall impression of the product and determine which packaging leads to the most favourable feeling towards the product in entirety
- **Ask overall opinions up front:** Asking people a long list of attributes can cause them to think too long and rationalise their decision in preferences for a product/package and change their overall opinion. Overall impressions asked up front identify the most effective means of determining preference for packaging
- **Keep it in context:** Packaging should be measured in comparison to the competition, not in isolation
- **Keep it realistic:** Packaging research should ideally simulate the typical shopping and/or usage experience as much as possible
- **Take into account the inertia:** Packaging research should take into consideration current relationships and usage behaviour

FACT: The average British supermarket contains 25 000 items and the average shopping basket just 39 items. In a standard supermarket the typical shopper passes about 300 brands per minute. This translates into less than one-tenth of a second for a single product to get the attention of the customer and spark purchase.

- The Customer Equity Company is a wholly owned subsidiary of TNS (UK) which has been set up to develop the marketing sciences and support brand equity and Commitment modelling worldwide.

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