

# ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVES

*In a retail landscape punctuated by over-proliferation and over-communication, brands must communicate clearly.*

BY GAIL RITACCO

When shopping in our local grocery store, we're on auto-pilot, cruising up and down the aisles, buying what we always buy. That is, unless another brand or product is on sale or has replaced our usual choice, or a child is nagging for something different.

There's an over-proliferation of brands and an over-communication of messages. Often, consumers cannot find their preferred brand or fail to notice when a new product appears. With only three to five seconds for a brand to win over a consumer, the package must quickly meet functional and emotional needs, yet be distinctive and relevant to the category. Its main benefit must be telegraphic, clear and simple.

## Get out of the office!

To understand consumer needs, we must build on informed category and business data and rise above the stereotypes of our target. We need to leave our office and the focus group "back room", and immerse ourselves in the real-life situation of a store aisle.

To inspire creativity and identify potential opportunities, we need to witness purchasing and usage behavior. We need to watch and listen to consumers in-home, at their workplace, in their car or wherever the relevant moment exists. By observing unspoken behavior and listening to the top-of-mind concerns and complaints, we can build valuable insight into the satisfiers, dissatisfiers, workarounds, potential opportunities and delighters.

Sometimes the occasion or the category requires observation that's conducted "undercover". At these times, the Internet can provide a forum for consumers to anonymously

**Packaging should communicate a brand's point of difference. Voss's minimal graphics and simple geometric shape reflect the idea of purity, help the brand stand out and work to make it memorable.**

record their thoughts, feelings and emotions. They can do this in words, pictures or video, at a time that's most convenient for them, ensuring rich discussion that is untainted by peer pressure or group dynamics. Have you visited youtube.com lately? It's an excellent place to explore how consumers candidly and openly discuss their likes and dislikes of major products and brands.

Accompanying the consumer in-store also provides valuable insight. What are they thinking when they approach the shelf? What do they notice first? What does or doesn't stand out—and why?

## Less is more

Once we understand the hierarchy of consumers' needs, the challenge is to translate that information into the most meaningful competitive point of difference. How can the package communicate this point of difference?

Unique products like Voss Water are successful at telegraphically communicating their singular, most compelling benefit. The brand's stark, pure, minimal communication speaks to the pure, natural benefit of the water inside. Voss provides a discontinuous look to the busy brand communication that exists in the water category. Most water brands rely on aspirational imagery like mountain tops. But because of Voss's minimalist graphics and simple geometric shape, it stands out and is memorable. The takeaway: One must avoid putting every message onto the package. Sometimes less is more.

Inspiration for building the emotional and visual perceptions of consumers into a physical reality can be obtained in a variety of ways. One successful method is to have consumers collage a series of visual cues as they relate to the intended message. In this way consumers provide guidance as to what overall shapes, textures, colors and aesthetics will communicate the key brand attributes. The result



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should be iconic and memorable.

Satisfying currently unmet functional and emotional needs will ensure relevance and translate to shelf distinction. The solution, however, must be category appropriate and fit with pre-existing visual language cues.

For instance, a pour spout on the new Crisco Canola oil certainly solves a functional need. But the through handle bottle configuration and dosing closure is reminiscent of laundry and may be irrelevant to the category, potentially distancing the consumer from any association with food.

One must also be careful to not overstate functional needs without considering the overall form of the package. A package's silhouette can be a very strong visual cue. For example, Wish-Bone's new spray salad dressing package could have been executed in a way that provides ultimate spray performance via a trigger sprayer. But the choice of the finger spray happens to fit within the category silhouette, keeping it relevant to pre-existing category language.



**Perception is reality**

On-shelf perception is the consumer's reality. The format must communicate the functional benefit in a way that is believable. Otherwise consumers will never get to the "second moment of truth"—usage.

Validating direction through appropriate qualitative and quantitative research at various stages of design and development is important to ensure ultimate success. The tools are varied: ethnographies, blogging, focus groups, concept tests and choice modeling can all help focus direction. Shelf tests confirm if a product is breakthrough and if the benefit is communicated effectively. Usability tests ensure that the second moment of truth



**Wish-Bone's packaging for its Salad Spritzers line is functional but also consistent with consumers' category expectations. A trigger sprayer might perform better, but it's a format consumers associate more with cleaning products.**

has impact, and ultimately a volume forecast will help understand the size of the opportunity.

Take the time to understand and effectively translate your consumers' unmet needs. Convert these needs into a competitive point of difference, while creating a distinctive format that is relevant to the consumer and appropriate to the category. Be careful to not over-communicate but ensure that your most important selling feature is clearly portrayed.

Do all this, and you can maximize those precious three to five seconds. What's the next challenge? Ensure that consumers are delighted at the second moment of truth. **BP**

**On the Web**

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