

Question & Answer

Why These Complex Times Demand Simpler Packaging

By Todd Wasserman twasserman@brandweek.com

After the economy came crashing down in late 2008, consumers instinctively gravitated toward things that were more stripped down. The quest for simplicity was even reflected in those consumers' choices of packaged goods. The cluttered look of the boom times gave way to more spartan designs that harkened back to an earlier era. At least, that's Peter Clarke's take. The CEO and founder of Product Ventures, a Fairfield, Conn., design firm that has created packaging for Heinz, Folgers and Febreze, among other brands, Clarke said he expects the simplicity trend to continue as well as sustainability. In fact, within five years or so, Clarke expects that it will be common in the U.S. to see carbon footprint data alongside nutritional information on most packaging. Clarke discussed that and other movements in vogue in packaging design with Brandweek. Here are some excerpts:

BRANDWEEK: You believe that packaging has become simpler of late. Can you describe what you mean by that?

PETER CLARKE: Simplicity is one of the tenets of today's values. It's based on a need for clarity in this very complicated, untrusting world that we're all living in right now. Brands are distilling their product messaging to the product essence. In a way, in this overcrowded marketplace, many brands are finding that less is actually more.

BW: What packaging has come out that reflects this?

PC: There's been a lot of work. Some of it's been a combination of simplicity but also retro vintage. Old packaging didn't allow a lot of elaborate stuff. It evolved over the years. We've been seeing much more cluttered marketing messages on the front of packages, so I'd say there's been a lot of cleanup, especially in the cereal aisle. That was one of the worst aisles in terms of clutter because everyone was shouting. So, in a way, when everyone is shouting and you whisper, you create that contrast. For the consumers, it really helps them filter out things that don't matter to them so they can home in on making that decision, whether it's right or not.

BW: What in particular in the cereal aisle?

PC: There's been a lot of work that General Mills has done and the Post brands as well. There's also [a trend] toward fewer and lesser ingredients. Frito-Lay, for instance, has just those three ingredients—potatoes, all-natural oil and just a dash of salt. It's clever to make it easy for consumers to feel good about their choices. And Häagen-Dazs' Five, which is just milk, cream, sugar, eggs and the flavor of whatever the product offering is. That stuff is



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Peter Clarke

is the CEO and founder of Product Ventures, a leading package design firm

really standing for the times when consumers are still uncertain. If marketers can distill things down to less clutter and more of a purity of message and purity of ingredients, that's what people are looking for now.

BW: Are there any specific things that General Mills is doing that's part of this trend?

PC: There are quite a few. They're a little too vintage, so I'm not sure if they're the best examples, but there [are] Kix and Wheaties. There was one that I've seen that was done between Nabisco and Target, which launched last year. It had Oreo cookies and Ritz crackers that were packaged in such a simplistic way. It almost looked retro. It was fresh and uncluttered, almost hyperclean.

BW: Speaking of uncluttered, wasn't the Tropicana design, the one that came out a year ago, very uncluttered?

PC: I'm glad you're talking about that because there's a flip side to this. That went so far as to lose the brand essence. There's a difference between uncluttered and hyperclean and then just obscuring the identification. The intent, as I understood it, was to be very clean, which is definitely a design trend. The iconic resonance or semiotic relationship of that orange with a straw was the identifying character of that brand, and it became a me-

too store brand. Unfortunately, store brands have really caught on to that simplicity of messaging. To have a national brand try to mimic what they're doing and disregarding a very important element is reactive and not very well thought through.

BW: So this simplicity trend is going hand-and-hand with the economy?

PC: Just to give you a bit of background, we're a creative agency and research is inte-

gral to what we do. So every day we seek to understand the changing attitudes, needs and desires that are derived from a variety of factors. What we're seeing today is consumer confidence has been shattered. People are skeptical of false

claims and promises, and simplicity really fills a need on the part of the consumer...When you're under a lot of pressure, you have a tendency not to be as avant-garde and risk-taking and overindulgent as you can when you've got a pocket full of cash.

BW: Are there any other trends you're seeing?

PC: Sustainability absolutely is not only [a] trend, but it's also a very important design principle that people are going after.

BW: Is a lot of this greenwashing though?

PC: Much of what really needs to be done unfortunately is not readily understood by consumers. The behind-the-scenes life cycle and stuff such as energy usage have a much greater impact on greenhouse gases, so it's like Al Gore trying to explain to someone about the truth of greenhouse gases. It seems too abstract to people. Marketers are trying to find something more visceral, like maybe going to different paper, but the reality is that may run slower on a manufacturing line and may not be as efficient as something else.

BW: What about labeling the product's carbon footprint?

PC: My guess is it will be here between two to five years, and it will be pretty prevalent in five. ■