Packaging’s crucial role in omnichannel marketing
Disrupting digital overload

We’re almost a decade on from the first iPhone and it finally feels as if the honeymoon period the world has enjoyed with modern technology is coming to an end. As most white-collar work becomes increasingly digitized, we’re experiencing digital burnout and are increasingly looking for ways to switch off, rather than turn on.

Sales of good old-fashioned paper books are on the up while ebook sales have stagnated. Meanwhile, by integrating digital technology into their processes as well as their front-of-house service, traditional retailers have been taking strong steps towards winning back customers from the online giants.

Packaging’s inherent tactility is something that digital has been striving to emulate for many years now but without success. No online experience can satisfactorily reproduce the feeling of picking up and holding a physical object. Packaging can suggest luxury and leisure in a way that digital content cannot. It may be disposable but it is not ephemeral. It provides brands with a direct, physical (and even olfactory) connection to their audiences.

Packaging is the first moment of truth, the initial opportunity a potential buyer has to experience a product. And although this power is physical, digital can also supplement the packaging itself, a method of engagement with consumers pioneered by LEGO as far back as 2009 with its in-store, augmented-reality enabled packs, which have the potential to also provide a gateway to digital marketing and services.

The toymaker and many of its market companions, such as Hasbro and Disney, have continued to innovate in this space, creating a bridge between toys and computer games that has culminated in recent releases such as augmented reality-supporting packs of LEGO’s Scooby Doo Mystery Machine and Hasbro’s Transformers: Robots in Disguise. Interactive packaging for kids has come a long way since Epoch’s Barcode Battler of the early 1990s. It’s been a natural step to move beyond packaging and books to the toys themselves, which has resulted in the phenomenal success of crossover toys like Disney Infinity, LEGO Dimensions and Skylanders.
Design director Nick Clement, who has worked with the likes of the BBC, HSBC and Samsung, says that he’s keen to see how more melding of the disciplines of packaging - and digital user experience design - can add to customer experiences. He predicts 2016 will be a zeitgeist year for both augmented reality and potentially virtual reality too. “But saying that,” he cautions, “traditional design-led packaging is a crucial part of the brand mix. I still hit BP&O a few times a week to catch up on the latest in graphic and packaging design.”

Design Week editor Angus Montgomery explains why this is so. “Packaging has traditionally been seen as the ‘front line’ of branding and, despite the growth of channels such as online retail, this remains the case. As a discipline, packaging provides a clear and distilled view of prevailing design trends.”
The craft of packaging

In recent years there has been a focus on traditional craft skills, notably in the spirits sector, with projects such as the Balvenie 50 by Here Design and Conran’s limited edition Gordon’s bottles. Emma Booty, head of the Conran Studio that produced the bottles, notes in a blog post that “the top tier bottles are presented akin to high end couture: the shiny white box opens to reveal a tailored fabric-wrapped bottle with signed sample tag and limited edition print”.

Montgomery notes how this level of craft has translated into humour and quirkiness, as seen in the likes of Design Bridge’s work for PepsiCo’s Tiger Nuts. Design Bridge comments on the part the packaging can play in snaring a customer’s attention:

“Our job was to design a pack that jumped, or in this case pounced, off the shelves. Spending the time to draw it again and again to get it just right whilst holding onto the joyful simplicity of the original idea was, we think, what made this design so beautifully effective. It’s about the craft of it all… we designed something that corners people – it’s the kind of visual trick that once seen, can never be unseen.”

As well as grabbing a customer’s attention in the first place, packaging can of course also help a brand develop longer-term connections with consumers. At its simplest, this is about the pure experience of handling a boxed product. Multi-disciplinary designer George Hadley feels that, for all that the digital world creeps into every corner of our lives, “we are physical beings and as such are affected by the physical nature of products. We’re seduced by the tactile qualities of materials and finishes, which have the power to either tempt or reassure us that we really should part with our cash.”

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Hadley cites examples including Howies re-appropriated T-shirt packaging which had originally been used to house tulips, and Irving & Co’s work for cyclewear brand Rapha’s venture into skincare. Both were design-led projects that he worked on.
Artwork management

An emphasis on the value of packaging, as a tool to communicate to customers, comes across loud and clear in some recent high-profile rebrands for major fast food brands. Those in the space may have embraced social media to expand and support their customer service offerings but it hasn’t stopped them ramping up the focus on heritage and authenticity. Domino’s Pizza embraced traditional illustration on its packaging, commissioning a widely-admired custom font by Terrance Weinzierl, modeled after nineteenth century American gothic sans serif typefaces.

Meanwhile Burger King and McDonald’s both rebranded their packaging. Burger King has also gone traditional, while the McDonald’s rebrand by Boxer has a more modern feel but ups the presence of the packaging through impactful use of solid color and large type on sturdy packaging.

Hadley recognizes the importance of this visual representation of authenticity, stating: “Well designed packaging has the ability to become iconic, a physical shorthand for the brand itself, and sometimes a symbol in its own right. Think of the work of pop artist Andy Warhol or how hipster cafes are wont to use golden syrup cans as cutlery holders.”

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How packaging helps brands get omnichannel right

For those unfamiliar with the term, ‘omnichannel’ refers to a multichannel form of brand delivery where all the parts of a brand jigsaw are not just complementary but have been considered holistically at the outset, so that they are connected and form a cohesive whole. For example, a central database joins up not only marketing with sales, but cuts across both bricks-and-mortar and ecommerce experiences. Does packaging have a part to play in this?

“The most successful brands,” argues Design Week’s Montgomery, “particularly in fast moving consumer goods, will still be those that use their packs as the key pillars of their branding.”

Although Dominique Bonnafoux, senior strategist at retail specialists Fitch, agrees that packaging’s primary purpose is to protect, she notes that its role has “evolved towards attracting consumers, facilitating purchase decisions and driving differentiation from competition”.

For a more public-facing example of the central role packaging can play in omnichannel marketing, take a look at Coca-Cola’s UK-oriented ‘one brand’ strategy. It uses Coca-Cola’s iconic packaging as the core for the rest of its brand building, the main aim of which, the company states, is to help clarify for British consumers “the choice offered within the Coca-Cola trademark”.

The case of retailer Kingfisher

Brand owners looking to harness the power of omnichannel could learn plenty from Kingfisher, Europe’s largest home improvement retailer, which has over 1,000 stores and 80,000 employees worldwide. As revealed in a presentation delivered by packaging development manager Kay Hedges at Global Pack Summit, an internal review showed the company had over 150 brands. An ambitious organizational project distilled these down to just nine and the company has used the project outcomes to embark on a wide-reaching omnichannel approach, not just across a single brand but across its entirety, employing packaging management that increases brand efficiency.

As an increasing number of our purchases are made online, Kingfisher has taken savings made from reducing the amount of graphic design and full color reproduction it uses for its packaging and invested instead in making robust packaging that reaches customers in shop-shelf condition, and – importantly –has focused on improving the emergent user journeys that ecommerce necessitates. These days customers require not only a satisfactory order and delivery service but a painless means of returning goods too, which has implications upon a sellers’ inventory management.
Packaging in the retail space should aim to further enhance online experiences – using haptic (that is touch-focused) material, for example – to build on consumer expectations.

Dominique Bonnafoux, senior strategist, Fitch

Although it’s true that there are limited standout examples of the use of emergent digital technologies alongside traditional packaging, Bonnafoux senses that change is afoot.

She says: “Smart brands should consider the complementary roles of on- and offline channels and the opportunities they present for packaging. The web and mobile offer rich media environments, providing so much more than just product information and immersing consumers into your brand world. Packaging in the retail space should aim to further enhance online experiences – using haptic (that is touch-focused) material, for example – to build on consumer expectations.”

The highs and lows of packaging and customer relations

Contrast this with the way some brands are using physical packaging to engage in a hands-on relationship with customers, in some instances using it as an integral part of that 21st century brand aspiration of ‘doing good’. British soft drinks manufacturer Innocent’s Big Knit initiative invites supporters to donate tiny homemade knitted ‘hats’ for its smoothie range to wear. Its latest effort has resulted in over 800,000 hats being donated to raise awareness of the impact cold weather and low income have on elderly citizens, with proceeds going to charity Age UK.

Brands looking to both do good and adopt an omnichannel approach to marketing need to be careful, however. US retailer Target’s now infamous marketing faux pas is a klaxon-loud warning to over-eager marketers looking to know everything about their customers. There’s a fine line between being useful and being creepy. The more sophisticated customer service becomes, the more danger there is of brands crossing that line. How long before ad blocking software is followed to market by data blocking technology?
When it comes to communications, for the more private or cautious out there, there’s already the anonymity afforded by encryption and anonymizing services such as Yik Yak, Wickr and Whisper. Who’s to say services that do the same for customer data won’t hit soon? Modern consumers may be willing to trade some of their personal information in return for free and useful services such as Skype, Google search and Facebook but they’ll be less keen to share the same with brands that are already asking them to part with money.

Brand building blocks: Packaging that creates loyalty

And, as much as product and packaging designers trumpet the value of tactile brand experiences, where will packaging go in a world where the ‘tangibility’ a user experiences on digital platforms not only creates a sense of ownership but leads to greater perceived value which, some research shows, makes them more likely to buy?

Researchers at Clemson University in North Carolina found: “Psychological ownership or a feeling that ‘it is MINE!’ even in the absence of legal ownership, arises when consumers perceive control over an ownership target, come to intimately know the target and invest the self in the target.”

We’ve seen the commercialization of this form of relationship begin with the toys and games already mentioned, such as Disney Infinity and LEGO Dimensions, as well online worlds, from Second Life through to Minecraft.

With virtual reality set to become commonplace, packaging – especially for non-perishable goods – could be set to become something that is not only tangible but digitally as well as physically interactive.

“Omnichannel could be the making of packaging,” says Fitch’s Bonnafoux, “looking beyond graphics and format to reinforce the consumer experience, thus taking it much further than its origin as a simple protective wrapper.”

For future-gazing brands, packaging could run the gamut from initial call-to-action marketing, through to a customer service access point. For consumers it could be the loyalty signifier and storage system that in the future houses our most prized possessions.

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