



The Role of Packaging in Communicating taste

Dimitar Trendafilov and Ilaria Ventura

1. INTRODUCTION

As manufacturing, production and trade advance, **the packaging** of goods has become a necessity and its importance has constantly been increasing. For food products, packaging has generally been a way to provide a “barrier” or a “frame” within which certain products can be placed – such as beans, sugar, flour, seeds, liquids, but also oftentimes fruit and vegetables, all of which were once sold in bulk, in various units – kilogram, unit, litre, etc. Thus, packaging has made it somewhat easier for the consumers to deal with goods without having to lug various items around, without having to weigh and package them on their own. We say “somewhat” because such practices do still exist, and are even going through a sort of renaissance, especially having in mind recent ecological trends (especially when it comes to food products) going against most sorts of packaging. In other places, such as open markets or specialized butcher’s shops, it’s the seller who completes the above-mentioned weighing and packaging activity.

It is important to note that, while the packaging of physical goods is quite an understandable concept, it is not so clear when it comes to **services** (at least theoretically). In

fact, however, packaging in the service sector has simply been replaced by other visual elements, which, in their entirety, form a sort of “packaging”. The bank office, the interior of a restaurant, employee uniforms, stationery insignia – these have the same effect. In marketing, we talk about the “halo effect” (naturally, it’s up to the specialists at any given company to make sure that it’s a positive effect and acts as an attractor for customers), which, in the service sector, comprises of visible and invisible elements and processes, and the entire experience the customer goes through. You would certainly not be especially glad if you were to visit a fashionable restaurant, with great reviews, only to find out that half of the menu is unavailable, the waiter is incompetent or impolite, while the rowdy bunch at the next table is making your dinner even more unpleasant. Your unfavorable sentiment will be attributed to the restaurant itself, not to any particular person.

In this text, we will look more closely at packaging of physical products, due to their particular importance in food products, and more precisely – in shaping the perception of taste. Currently, packaging is so tightly connected with the product that some experts have suggested that it be called “the 5th element” of marketing, or at least that it be considered as one of the elements, whose development requires special attention. Little wonder, then, that entire design departments and even specialized creative agencies get huge budgets in order to develop new packaging ideas, better fitting the marketing objectives and the taste of today’s consumer. With this in mind, different experts propose various lateral definitions for packaging, most of which have particular attitude towards its role in the products’ advertising, and more specifically – towards the consumer’s contact with the desired product at the point of purchase:

- The constant media
- Marketing’s last 5 seconds
- The last salesman
- The brand’s face

2. MAIN FUNCTIONS OF PACKAGING

Before we list the multitude of objectives that plain old packaging has to accomplish, we must state that it is generally subdivided in three various types:

Internal layer (or storage/receptacle of the product).

External – which covers (usually) the internal and serves as a “face” on the shelf at the store, since it’s a direct (mostly visual, but not only) contact with the customer before the purchase.

Transport packaging – useful when transporting and storing in warehouses.

As it is already obvious, we are talking about packaging’s tendency to affect the customer at the moment when she is making her choice, during actual shopping. However, we also see packaging “exposed” in TV commercials, in the shop windows and

– something often underestimated – in our homes and during the actual moment of utilization (while eating a Mars bar, we often perceive the packaging as a sort of “banana peel”, so that we do not have to touch the product with our hand, while we store the olive oil we use in our salads in its original packaging). It is no less important to note that packaging is also directly connected to the price of the product, and that developing technologically, functionally, aesthetically, ergonomically and legally appropriate packaging leads to actual expenses, which are included in the end price.

Coming from the practical situations, in which packaging is used, theory has come up with the following main functionalities:

- **Presentation** – advertises the product (creating an image about its content, price and general positioning).
- **Preservation** – shields the product from external influence (light, air, mixing with other products, leakage, unwanted skin contact, etc.).
- **Protection** – supports the functionality of the product.
- **Portability** – provides convenience during transportation (usually from manufacturer to retailer, but also from the shop to the home, office, kitchen, etc.), keeping the product intact.
- **Proportion** – contains the precise/required/stated quantity of the product for the respective price.
- **Pollution** – meets ecological requirements and standards in order to protect the environment during the production, utilization and disposal of the product.
- **Promotion** – promotes the brand, adds value to the product with additional information, illustrations, instructions, markings, certificates, barcodes, etc.

It can clearly be seen that the main functionality of packaging is to protect the product and right after that (and as a consequence) – to protect its functionality. This is especially typical when storing liquids, some foodstuffs, chemical products, etc. Usually, at the discretion of retailers, some packaging even contains markers or devices, which protect against theft in shops. They activate alarms in the case someone attempts to take them out of the shop without having paid.

Although they usually function simultaneously, sometimes some of the aforementioned principles stand out. For example, Proportion, Promotion and Environmental friendliness overlap to a large extent in the so-called “economy size” packaging. This type of packaging is “proportional” according to the quantity requirements of a given customer target and it reduces the manufacturer’s packaging costs, while providing a promotional offer for the end user by exposing a positive benefit-cost ratio. Finally, the packaging itself is less than it would be in the standard case, which benefits the environment by creating less pollution. Meanwhile, when the shop offers a “2+1” promotion (“buy two, get one free”), the products need to be bundled together in a larger package, which also means that some

additional Promotional elements (stickers, ribbons, additional cardboard or plastic elements, etc.) need to be provided, without making the bundle harder to transport or use.

The promotional functionality is the result of a series of verbal and nonverbal elements, whose sum is also called “**media ecology**” of the packaging, since it functions in a system, which should inform, attract, convince and educate. The manufacturers create a certain image of themselves (luxury, ecological, farmer, etc.) and certain associations through colors, materials and the overall shape of the packaging. If we look at Pringles cans, for example (a light, metallic cylinder with a plastic cover, suitable for multiple use), we can see how an innovative packaging can become a meaningful – i.e. recognizable – element of the brand, while strongly connected to the functioning and protection of the product. In short, in addition to being different from other brand of chips (who tend to use bags), Pringles is convenient. Similarly, we can look at the small and easy-to-use sachets of instant “Nescafe 3-in-1” coffee, which were created precisely to be convenient, with a specific target – people on the go.

When talking about “verbal” elements (i.e. written text), we usually mean the name of the brand, the name of the manufacturer (and any additional indications), the country of origin, and the information regarding the content, use and storage of the product, as well as any certifications, warnings, instructions, etc. “Nonverbal” elements, on the other hand, include the size, shape and material of the packaging, characters and symbols (e.g. certificates), colors and color combinations, fonts, images, as well as the overall collaboration between these elements, and the ideas they may inspire in the consumer.

All of the above helps the brand, the manufacturer and the product to be recognized, and can lead to a **spontaneous purchase**, to provide better, more useful and more interesting information, to help the consumers perceive the quality of the product, etc. It is well known that, in general, we tend to perceive most of the information with our sight, which is why many manufacturers use tricks to outwit us, or to suggest certain proportions of their products through packaging. Thin, vertical lines, for example, can make the packaging seem taller, while wide, vertical lines make it appear shorter and more compact. Comparing the different items at the shelves is also important, as the consumer only has mere moments to perceive the information from the packages, which can sometimes be in the thousands (img. 1). This is why manufacturers usually test their packaging ideas, using dummy samples of their direct competitors’ products, so as to simulate real market situations. This way they can better judge whether their packaging stands out, if it’s better, more attractive, more informative (it is recommended that no more than 2-3 important pieces of information cohabit the same packaging). Simultaneously, manufacturers do their best – and spend large amounts of money – to make sure that their products are placed on the best locations on

the shelves (usually at eye level, as well as in zones of the shops where there is the most traffic).

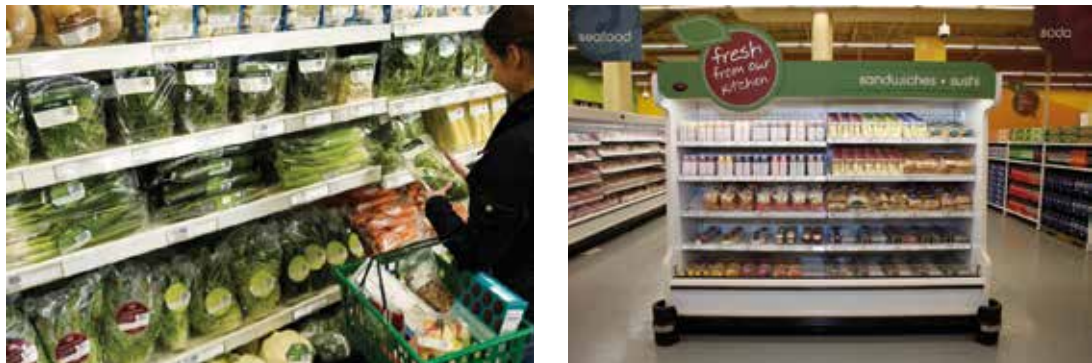


Fig. 1. The role of packaging as media when presented on an entire shelf, as well as during close contact between the products and the consumer.
Sources: <https://www.seriousseats.com> and <http://freshneasybuzz.blogspot.com>.

The typical packaging of the “Vereya” milk brand of the United Milk Company (Bulgaria) is a clear example for the multi-communicational function of packaging (img.2). Firstly, it has a rectangular shape, which makes it easy to transport alongside other packages, to put on the shelf, and to hold in the customer’s hand. Secondly, the material it is made of is suitable for long-term storage (TetraPack), while the opening of the package is made for multiple use. Thirdly, the dominating color is green (in contrast with the red color of the brand name), which demonstrates a lower fat content, in contrast with the blue color, which the company uses to denote milk with 3% fat content. Then, on the top of the packaging we can see a box, showing the “best before” date, as well as instructions for using the opening. Next, on the “face” of the box (the side, usually turned toward the shoppers) is a label which describes the product – “milk” (top left of img. 2); as well as graphic elements (akin to children’s drawings), indicating that this is cow’s milk, presumably from a farm; and then a quality certificate. The “back” side (right of img. 2) of the packaging contains mostly verbal information, identifying the manufacturer, the batch of the product (barcode), a customer phone line, nutritional parameters of the product (table) and some more non-verbal/graphical communication, related to the recycling of the packaging (i.e. demonstrating the manufacturer’s environmental responsibility). Finally, one of the sides of the packaging, apart from displaying even more certificates, is fully used as an advertisement board, where the manufacturer has displayed other of its dairy products range. That would indicate that the company relies on the packaging to act as an advertising channel, precisely in the home space, the office, or the restaurant, where the product will be used.



Fig. 2. "Multifunctional" packaging of "Vereya" milk.
Photos by the author.

Changes in the appearance of packaging can be significant and can literally transform the way a product appears, especially if we do not see it directly on the shelf when we are shopping. As an example for this, the website Boredpanda.com demonstrated how some mass food products – and not especially healthy ones – could look, if their packaging were to be reimagined according to the “hipster culture” (img. 3). This serves to show that a change is not especially difficult to achieve and the shopper can perceive the food in a very different way, simply because of the packaging.



Fig. 3. Real packaging of some of the most widespread (and not especially healthy) food products in the USA, next to their hypothetical modernized versions.
Source: www.boredpanda.com

3. INNOVATIVE PACKAGING

Sometimes manufacturers resort to original caps or locking mechanisms of the packaging, original design, additional accessories or attachments, in order to achieve distinction on the shelf, and to make their product more memorable. These innovations, however, have a more pronounced effect when they actually improve the main functions of the packaging described above (ease of use, convenience, storage, longevity, etc.). This comes with its disadvantages, seeing as unusual packaging often require increased effort by the company, as well as additional time for the consumer to learn to handle the novel design and to recognize its added advantages. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, changes in design could bring to changes in perception – for example (as studies demonstrate), interesting and attractive packaging makes people believe that it contains a larger amount of the product. Another example of “teaching” the consumer can be seen in a campaign by Lidl retail chain from several years ago, where a TV commercial explained that products, sold in sealed plastic trays (generally meat and similar items) were sealed in a special atmosphere of a colorless gas, which protects the product from microorganisms for a longer time. While this is not some packaging innovation – manufacturers routinely use this approach to increase the shelf life of perishable items – Lidl announced it publicly and managed to build up their image, without even being a manufacturer of the aforementioned items.

3.1. NEW TRENDS IN FOOD PACKAGING

- **Aesthetics** – we do not need many examples to prove that the aesthetic function of packaging is becoming increasingly more important. Each of us can go to any store, which offers packaged goods, and witness the variation and attractiveness of the items. Furthermore, if one were to compare today's items and those, offered 10, 20 or even 50 years ago, it would become even more obvious how far we have come in packaging design – making the items more beautiful (original, distinguishable), better aligned to the requirements of the particular brands, of the contemporary perception of “beauty”, etc.
- **Interactivity** – a part of the functionality in the 21st century escapes its strict functional relationship with the product (img. 4). The image on the left shows how, apart from utility and direct communication, the design relies on extending the relationship with the consumer by providing a QR code (upper right corner). The QR's role is to allow the users the possibility to seek additional specific information online – about the brand, the product, the store or the restaurant – and to even allow them to participate in some promotional activity and/or to request registration in a loyalty program and receive interesting information about the manufacturer, events, promotions and new products. This practice has been on the increase, espe-

cially with food products and beverages. Many manufacturers rely on this approach in order to provide additional ideas and recipes for using their products, and so – to increase their value to you as users. On the other hand, some luxury companies provide QR codes, which help guarantee the consumers that they are looking at a genuine product.



Fig. 4. Packaging evolution – originality, fun, adding new elements.
Sources: <https://www.qr-code-generator.com> and <https://www.boredpanda.com>.

- **Entertainment** – The item on the right side of the image (4) is an example of combining functionality (when opening the product) and fun. In other situations, designers turn to comics, labyrinths, all sorts of games, which allow the user to draw, write and even put together different fun designs. In the beverage field, unique designs for certain limited series can even become collectibles, which adds an element of **gamification**, which can last long after the product has been utilized – and thus makes people remember and even prefer the particular brand.

FOCUS 1

Coca-Cola and the Contour Bottle

Some of the packaging used by the world's most famous brands is so well known that it is considered iconic. What does this mean? In short, these objects have acquired, for the collective imagination, a broader communicative and cultural role than that of simple containers. The Coca-Cola bottle, that used by luxury water brand Perrier, Toblerone's pyramid-shaped packaging, the bottle of Chanel n. 5 (to name but a few examples) are so famous globally that in some cases they have become logos for the brands themselves (Figs 1 and 2). For certain brands, packaging design is of central importance. Their advertising materials draw the consumer's attention to it, often through the use of the **packshot**, and it functions as a visual sign

that conveys the values of the brand. it conveys the values of the brand. The green, curved bottle used by Perrier immediately brings to mind the brand's values of luxury and elegance. The square silhouette of Chanel n. 5 evokes that collection of meanings connected to the product, such as femininity, refinement, a classic, timeless fragrance, and so on.

How is it possible for a simple container, like a bottle or a jar, to become such a powerful sign?

Let's look at Coca-Cola, which has some of the most successful packaging in the history of industrial production. Invented by an American pharmacist in 1886, as a drink to invigorate and aid digestion, Coca-Cola was initially contained in a simple cylindrical glass bottle. In 1915, the company held a competition to invent a new, unmistakable bottle that not only had to be recognisable to all on first sight, but also on first touch. The designer Earl J. Dean designed a prototype bottle that was extremely different to the bottles commonly found on the market at that time. Whilst those traditional bottles were generally smooth and straight, the Coca-Cola bottle was purposefully contoured, curved, with vertical lines embossed on the glass surface. And so the *contour* bottle was born – this is the official name of Coca-Cola's glass bottle (Fig 3 and 4) – as if telling us that the Coke packaging is the *contour par excellence*. Though the bottle has undergone various changes, being slimmed down among other minor modifications, the outline of the bottle has remained the same for over one hundred years. During the 1960s, cans arrived followed by multi-format plastic bottles, causing Coca-Cola's packaging system to broaden and diversify. Within this system we can identify a number of unchanging visual elements that guarantee coherence and recognisability: the white/red duality, the sinuous form of bottles, the **brand name** and the 'dynamic wave', the long white curl found on the logo and all packaging (fig. 5). But the most representative packaging remains the *contour* bottle, which has been a firm fixture in Coca-Cola's advertising: television spots, print ads and posters all often feature the bottle as their protagonist (Fig. 6). Demonstrating the strategic centrality of packaging for brand identity is also the fact that their historic rival, Pepsi, designed their own packaging system inspired by that of Coca-Cola, imitating it in some ways and using others to set itself apart.

There are numerous stories about the possible origins of the *contour* bottle. One is that its unique shape is derived from the shape of the skirts worn by women in the early twentieth century, broad at the hips and tight at the ankles (known as hobble skirts). According to another version of the story, its silhouette was inspired by the curvaceous figure of the actress of the time, Mae West, and in yet another legend, its true inspiration is the shape

of the cacao pod, which is equally sinuous. Regardless of the supposed truth of these various versions of the story, when it comes to the culture and communication of taste, what is most important is the fact that different transpositions exist for the same event, serving only to render this bottle's history even more legendary and iconic. Indeed, exhibitions, shows, books and illustrated albums have been dedicated to Coca-Cola's packaging, not to mention the numerous citations in films and works of art (especially in pop art and the work of Andy Warhol). These phenomena demonstrate how the bottle, beyond its practical function of preserving and protecting the drink, plays a communicative and cultural role that is much further reaching. First and foremost, it is the identifying sign of the brand and everything that means, but it is also the sign of a time and a certain style of consumption, and therefore, the carrier of social and cultural views. Coca-Cola brings to mind dynamism, Americanism, socialising, liberation, though according to one's viewpoint, it can also signify consumerism, globalisation, commodification and so on.



Fig. 5. The bottle 'inside' the bottle.



Fig. 6. The outline of the Perrier bottle is used as a distinguishing feature, even on its cans.



Fig. 7. Poster demonstrating the evolution of Coca-Cola's packaging, from its conception to the 1960s



Fig. 8. The current design for the glass contour (2019)



Fig. 9. The dynamic wave.



Fig. 10. Print ad for the United States, early 1990s.

FOCUS 2

Nutella and the Pelikan Jar

Another case of packaging that has become truly iconic is that of the hazelnut chocolate spread Nutella, produced by Italian company Ferrero (Fig 1). The Nutella jar came about in the 1960s and is called the *Pelikan*, seemingly because its design was inspired by the shape of the ink bottle of the same name. When the spread was still called *SuperCrema*, its container was very different to what it is now: a long jar with vertical lines embossed on the glass surface. Later, when the brand was renamed Nutella, the old jar was substituted with an eight-sided glass (Fig. 2). In the mid-1960s, the current jar was introduced, with its softer lines and slightly concave shape in the centre. The straight and longer lines of previous containers are gone. Curved lines dominate, and the object's general orientation is no longer vertical but horizontal. The new jar seems to better communicate the substance contained within it: through the softness of its lines, the sense of creaminess is heightened. Another fundamental element for Nutella's visual identity, as well as its container's outline, is the image on its label, which has remained the same since the 1960s: a slice of bread with Nutella spread thickly over it, a knife, a glass of milk and hazelnuts beside it. This is not simply a banal visual decoration, it is more than that: it is an offer of consumption and of taste, a slice of daily life featuring simple objects that attempts to sum up the Nutella experience.

As with Coca-Cola, this packaging is a complex visual sign, representative of the brand and everything it signifies (the other brands of hazelnut chocolate spread on the

Italian market, for example, have chosen different types and shapes of container). A few years ago, the first *Nutella Cafés* opened in the US, their entrance doors mimicking the outline of the jar. Entering a Nutella Café means literally immersing oneself in the jar of hazelnut chocolate spread (Fig. 3). In 2014, Nutella collaborated with Italian design house Alessi in the creation of the *Nutella Clock* (Fig. 4), and in 2019, they made a jar-radio alarm clock. And so the jar goes from being a simple container and becomes a design object, a collector's item to have on display. Different in their objective but similar in style are the brand's limited edition promotions, like the 7 Million Campaign (2017): special edition jars numbered by Nutella and boasting brightly coloured, neon illustrations. The interesting aspect of all these makeovers is that the packaging takes on a new meaning (broader, more cultural), whilst, at the same time, essentially reinforcing the very identity of the brand's sign, as it just a few features make it instantly recognisable. What are these features? There is, of course, the jar's outline, but also its white lid and the horizontal band formed by the label. In fact, as happens with logos, which are small signs that must be very simple but still capable of communicating many different meanings, packaging, especially in those large global brands, also reinforces the product's communicative power when it is visually simplified, losing some of its detail and thus becoming, more than ever, icons of our consumption.



Fig. 11. The Nutella jar.



Fig. 12. Nutella advert from the 1960s, with its eight-sided jar.



Fig. 13. Nutella Clock by Alessi.



Fig. 14. Entrance to the Nutella Café, Chicago.