

The Blink Factor™

is your brand connecting?



Shikatani Lacroix is a leading branding and design firm located in Toronto, Canada. The company commission assignments from all around the world, across CPG, retail and service industries, helping clients achieve success within their operating markets. It does this by enabling its clients' brands to better connect with their consumers through a variety of core services including corporate identity and communication, brand experience design, packaging, naming and product design.



About the Author

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Jean-Pierre (JP) Lacroix provides leadership and direction to his firm, which was founded in 1990. He has spent the last 30 years helping organizations better connect their brands with consumers in ways that impact the overall performance of their business. Mr. Lacroix was the first to coin and trademark the statement “The Blink Factor” in 1990, which today is a cornerstone principle to how brands succeed in the marketplace. JP has authored several papers, has been quoted in numerous branding and design articles and, in 2001 he co-authored the book “The Business of Graphic Design” which has sold over 10,000 copies. JP can be reached at jpacroix@sld.com and you can follow his blog at: www.belongingexperiences.com & www.belongingexperiences.wordpress.com.

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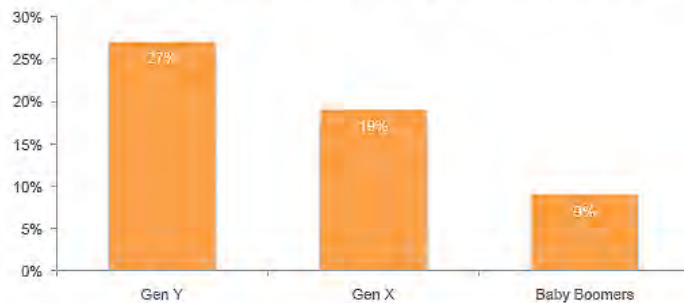
Business of Graphic Design

A world of confusion

Everything today is getting more complex and confusing, from the growth of brands at retail to the blurring of retail boundaries as marketers explore new opportunities to grow market share. The rise of social media has added to the level of anxiety and noise in the marketplace. In 2009, the average supermarket was carrying more than 45,000 products, more than a triple digit increase from 1980. A record-breaking number of new products hit supermarket shelves in 2006, with a strong focus on good health, according to the Mintel Global New Products Database. Close to 182,000 products were introduced globally in 2006. Key growth areas were mind, body and general good health. Almost 105,000 food and drink products were launched, and more than 77,000 non-food products.

Although the recession has cut new product launches in half between 2008 and 2009, the number is still staggering for consumers trying to make a buying decision at retail. A.C. Nielsen conducted a study in 2009 that identified that although manufacturers have significantly cut back investment in new product launches, consumers' purchase interest and value perceptions for new products did not change significantly during the same period. The complexity of choice at store level is compounded by the fragmentation of the media with conventional marketing channels' R.O.I. being challenged by new emerging social media vehicles that promote the values of measurable results and lower cost per thousand. These new channels to reach customers have eroded the effectiveness of current marketing approaches while adding to the challenges facing marketers. "How do I connect and engage consumers more effectively in a new complexity of approaches?"

Percent of Consumers Citing the Influence of Social Media Channels While Shopping Online



Source: Hill & Knowlton's "Future of Commerce Report"
Methodology: Collected from 600 U.S. adults, July 2008

 MarketingProfs

Adding to the shift in marketing strategies has been the need for consumers to feel in control of their buying decisions, leverage social media and the web as vehicles for them to gain knowledge and unbiased opinions on brands. A recent study conducted by MarketingProfs, a social media website dedicated to all things marketing, identified that 27% of Gen Y and 19% of Gen X cite the influence of Social Media Channels while shopping online. It is interesting that only 9% of the Baby Boomer's generation are influenced by social media as part of their online shopping.

These statistics support an emerging behavior where consumers are seeking new channels of knowledge to help guide them through the complexity of choice. In a study conducted by social networking site myYearbook, 81% of respondents said they received advice from friends and followers relating to a product purchase through a social site; 74% of those who received such advice found it to be influential in their decision (Click Z, January 2010). 90% of consumers online trust recommendations from people they know; 70% trust opinions of unknown users (Econsultancy, July 2009).

Understanding Visual Shorthand

As markets become blurred and the abundance of choice overwhelms consumers' need to make decisions, the ability to rely on quick visual reference points that provide a beacon in the complexity of choice become more critical. In his book "Blink", Malcolm Gladwell identifies that humans have survived as species for such a long time since we have been able to make quick decisions on our survival.

He notes that “thin-slicing” is the ability of our subconscious to find patterns such as packaging graphics, a unique color or shape based on a very limited amount of information.

In the design process of building strong brand recognition, we have named this behavior “visual shorthand”, the ability of consumers to make quick buying decision based on the availability of few key visual elements of the packaging. The importance for marketers and designers is to clearly understand which of these key elements contribute to creating effective split-second brand connections at store level. Our own brand studies have identified that non-verbal visuals such as color, shape or imagery play the most pivotal role in creating the right visual shorthand that will drive brand recognition and preference.

Based on a study conducted in 2005 on “The importance of packaging attributes: a conjoint analysis approach” - by Pinya Silayoi Department of Packaging Technology, Faculty of Agro-Industry, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand; and Mark Speece School of Business, Public Administration and Information Systems, University of Alaska Southeast - visual imagery on the package is an essential attribute that drives brand preference and selection. The study supports our own firm’s experience through numerous client-based research studies, that to be noticed at the point of sale, visuals on the package can be a strategic method of differentiation, since a picture is the most effective tool in creating emotional connections. Based on a study by Underwood in 2001, research identified that pictures are extremely vivid stimuli compared to words and also are quicker and easier for consumers to process in a low involvement situation.

Pictures have always been the most effective vehicle for educating children and also sharing the history of our culture and values. The visual shorthand on packaging creates strong shelf visibility, attracting attention and effectively connecting with consumers on both the functional and emotive level. A well-produced product image such as a smiling face, a pregnant woman or an appealing food shot is likely to evoke memorable and positive association with the product far beyond the written product descriptions or claims.



Packaging must also support how customers shop - as they scan quickly across a store shelf within a category that may easily contain more than 300 products, the eye is attracted by colors and shapes that either reinforce a current perception (a preferred brand) or establish new aspirational reflections that mirror the consumer's desired self-image.

Shelf studies conducted by our firm that included eye-scanning technology by research firms such as Hotspex clearly identify the location of visuals and shapes within a category and on given packages play a critical role in ensuring the brand is differentiated and retains strong visibility.

The conjoint study provided conclusive evidence, thus validating our ongoing belief that the four main packaging attributes found to influence the consumer's packaged food brand choice were color and graphic design (combined), shape, product information, and technology image (essentially, convenience). The layout of verbal and visual elements was also included to account for the impact of different positions of these two elements on the purchase decision.

Attribute	Level	Utility	Relative importance (%)
Packaging technology	Presented	0.8086	32.53
	Not presented	-0.8086	
Packaging shape	Curvy	-0.0381	18.96
	Straight	0.0381	
Product information	Precise	0.3857	17.42
	Vague	-0.3857	
Color and graphic	Colourful design	-0.1725	16.36
	Classic design	0.1725	
Layout of graphics and information	Left-right	-0.2980	14.74
	Right-left	0.2980	

Table III.
Results of conjoint
analysis ($n = 305$)

The conjoint results indicate that packaging technology (which conveys a message of convenience and ease of use in this study) plays the most important role in consumer likelihood to buy. The relative importance of this attribute is about 32% (Table III). The

other attributes included in this study were not much different from each other in importance. Packaging shape had a slight edge (19%) and supports a recent packaging project for one of our clients, Vivitas Women, where the unique bottle in the shape of a pregnant received the highest score for recognition and shelf visibility since it was clearly differentiated from adjacent brands that were packaged in conventional bottle shapes. The study identified that the third most important attribute was clustered around three factors: product information (17%), color and graphics (16%) and finally, layout of graphics and information (15%).



Based on the study, packaging technology is the most important attribute. The study identified that the specific message the technology conveys is about convenience and ease of use, so these results suggest that urban consumers give more consideration to technology that represents convenience; i.e., the technology image clearly shown on the pack seems to be more appealing on the shelf. This supports other studies we have conducted for a range of brands, where packaging features such as a re-sealable zipper bags, easy-to-grip lids, food that can be easily microwave and where the packaging also serves as the eating tray, do well in research and at shelf.

For InBev, the feature of a lined beer can that could retain the liquid at a colder temperature longer, or for Tetley Tea, a package that kept the product fresher longer and was easier to store in the cupboard were functional features that truly differentiated the product and drove sales. The study also identified a growing trend by consumers of reading the label information. With the growth of health and the awareness of unhealthy ingredients such as trans-fats, sugar, salt, in addition to food scares due to poor quality control practices, consumers are paying more attention to the ingredient panel and the country of origin. This indicates that consumers value the product information on food labels, and confirms prior studies from other countries (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1999) like Thailand (Silayoi et al. 2003; Silayoi and Speece, 2004) which show that consumers are increasingly reading the label and want it to be clear.



The results of the study suggest that consumers are evaluating product quality through a range of packaging stimuli, from the quality of the design to the health and product claims through the nutritional facts found on secondary panels. One thing this probably reflects is the impact of health-conscious behaviors on food choice, as concern for proper nutrition is now a key factor influencing consumption choice in many countries (McIlveen, 1994).



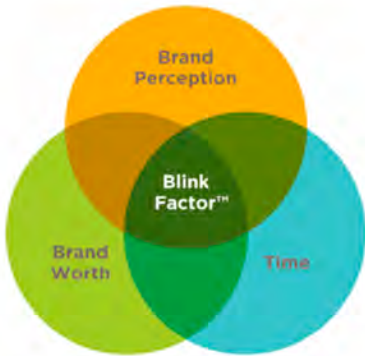
The study also identified that straight packaging shape had a positive influence compared to curvy design, as does classic shape on the package compared to colorful. This suggests that overall, the respondents may be more attracted to a package that seems familiar and reliable, and supports our view that branding is more about building trust through consistent delivery of the key emotive and functional benefits of the brand. It also supports why so many of new products fail to gain market share and customer preference.

Shop-ability a key driver in purchase intent

Work we have completed over the past 30 years in a wide range of categories have supported our belief that consumers tend to shop for a given variety such as a flavor, a format, a key benefit when shopping for a given product.

In a wide range of categories, the actual brand plays an endorser role, ensuring that the given variety matches the desired outcome following the actual purchases. If you were to weigh these factors on potential impact to ensure the Blink Factor, the ability to stand out at shelf level and effectively communicate a meaningful and differentiated offering would take the lead.

At Shikatani Lacroix, we believe that differentiation at shelf is predicated on a clear value proposition based on a strongly defined emotional and rational benefit driven by visual cues on the packaging. However, the study also identifies circumstances in which packaging changes can reduce sales, particularly if a new structure fails to meet shoppers' expectations and functional needs. Thus, packages that "break the rules" by violating category norms and expectations may be most successful when positioned as line extensions and tied to specific usage occasions, rather than as replacements for current packaging. Clear implications can be drawn from the study in determining how to approach and assess new packaging. First, the study demonstrates the need for upfront research with consumers, to understand functional priorities, expectations, and unmet opportunities within a product category. It is also important to understand that brands never exist in isolation in a retail environment and tend to compete with a wide range of new and existing products, pending the category size or growth. Consumers' shopping behavior, based on the fact that fewer than 35% come to a supermarket with a shopping list reinforces their reliance on packaging visual cues to make buying decision. How consumers navigate the category and use packaging cues to facilitate the purchase tree process becomes critical.



Brand Perception x Brand Worth x Time²

Instant Connections

Based on our own research findings and those of the packaging conjoint study, a key dimension of creating the right emotional connection is what we have come to define as the “Blink Factor”. With more than 70% of buying decisions done in the store and with the growth of brand fragmentation, consumers make their purchase decision in the blink of an eye based on some well-defined principles.

As consumers are offered more choices, they tend to rely on key visual cues that provide affirmation that they have found the right product. It is important to note that 40% of all communication consumers absorb is visually oriented and of this, 80% is color and shape.

Since visuals are the gateway to a consumer’s emotions, the importance of creating these split-second connections with consumers is paramount. Great brands are those that have fully leveraged the “Blink Factor”, ensuring that consumers easily identify brands based on the simplest of clues.

Based on our industry insights, the following principles help in assessing the Blink Factor:

- 1) Ability to stand out at shelf level
 - How quickly is the product seen;
 - How long is it viewed;
 - Is the packaged viewed a second time?

- 2) Does the package have the “Blink Factor”
 - Does the package have color recognition?
 - Does the package have a unique shape?
 - Does the package leverage a memorable image?

- 3) Does the package help shop-ability?
 - Right hierarchy of communication/viewing pattern
 - Ease of variety differentiation
 - Clear consumer benefit
 - Differentiation within the category
 - Is the design simple?

- 4) Does the package convey a meaningful and relevant point of difference?
 - Does the overall package design communicate an emotional and rational need state and strong value?
 - Is the key benefit clearly communicated visually?
 - Have the stated and hidden drivers been established?

- 5) Is the package effectively located within the category?
 - Is the package located at eye level and easy to grab?
 - Is the package in the right context?

Leveraging the blink factor allows brands to fully leverage visually their competitive advantage while creating a stronger emotional link with their desired target group. In a presentation by Scott Young, President of Perception Research Services, on 10 Principles for Effective Package Design, he identifies that clutter at store level is the reality of the new shopping experience.

The presentation notes that packaging must work within a cluttered shelf environment where the brand is positioned directly next to competitors. He noted that a package must “win” on key dimensions when compared directly to competitors since packaging influences product expectations, brand/user imagery and perceived value. These factors lead us to understand that packaging is more effective in creating relationships than other marketing vehicles.

Conclusion

The battlefield for products is becoming more and more complex, with a multitude of choices driving confusion and the lack of brand loyalty. Today, brands need to work harder at connecting and engaging consumers, and the ability to foster a preference in the blink of an eye becomes paramount. The research findings in this report support our many years of studying consumers' buying habits and the key role that great packaging design plays.

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