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The Future is Design

The fundamental issues regarding future consumerism will simply be based around how something looks. The actual function of products will eventually be consistent throughout the market place they compete in, technology and corporate consolidation will see to that.

What colour is it? What shape is it? How does it feel? – and, perhaps more importantly, how does it make *me* feel? These will be the issues that either consciously, or subconsciously, will more and more directly affect people's attitudes to the products they purchase.

The Apple iMac, Herman Miller Aeron or the design of the new Mini are perfect examples of this. All of these products are essentially no different mechanically from their competitors but their design makes them something to covet. These are objects that you want to touch and to stroke.

These principles apply to everything; food, drink, cars, banking, you name it and invariably you will be able align a company or product that stands out from its competitors purely based on its aesthetic or brand appeal.

The burgeoning global sandwich market is of course no different and actually is a perfect microcosm to study.

Most good quality sandwiches are pretty much the same: good bread, interesting fillings and 'nice' packaging. Occasionally a really good sandwich will make you smile, but how often does the packaging make you grin from ear to ear? And yet there is no doubt that it is one of the most important aspects of the entire experience; the packaging protects the product in storage and keeps it fresh, it displays it and catches the customer's eye. It opens easily and efficiently (!) and will be viewed in transportation and on someone's desk. It also has a life beyond the consumption of the food product it has enclosed. In short the packaging is a flagship for the brand and the products it supports.

The question of course is how many retailers truly understand this? Very few is the answer. Only a small number of sandwich retailers see their packaging as a true asset compared to the majority who see it as a fixed cost liability.

There is of course a trade off between cost and function, but this is not a simple equation. What the packaging says about the retailer's ability to innovate or how it supports the brands core values cannot be measured purely in the cost per unit. These are ethereal, non specific ideals that evoke thoughts and feelings that are not easily measured by market research and sales figures.

On this basis it is always important to remember that the customer is much smarter than we give them credit for. They are environmentally and socially aware. They are diet conscious and also have a good understanding of the cost base of many of the products they regularly purchase. As such they ultimately dictate the success or failure of a product – and this is a dynamic which is building and strengthening day by day.

Up until quite recently the manufacturer and retailer had the control. They produced, or provided for the customer, a product or a service under *their* terms – but that's changing.

The growing use of the internet will continue to shift power to the consumer. The World is becoming a marketplace available to anyone with a computer. A time will come where anything and everything will be available (even an elephant sandwich God forbid) and available in any colour, any shape and at any price. Business relationships will, quite literally, be forged and fragmented with the click of a mouse.

All this goes to show that getting 'clear air' in a market with so many highly focused players will be a very difficult proposition. However, packaging can provide the edge, especially if the packaging can also create a marketing opportunity or some level of added value – after all who doesn't want cleverness and innovation associated with their brand? This type of buzz is a fundamental way of maintaining existing customers and of generating new business.

As regards the sandwich market, there is no doubt that some people do buy based simply on the proximity of their sandwich shop. However, in areas where all the major brands compete, anything that creates an edge is worth its weight in gold.

Think what will happen when sandwich delivery, backed by real time online ordering and interaction, really takes off. Benjy's are already moving into franchise based delivery and if the other players have got any sense they will do the same. Why run an expensive chain of retail outlets when you could have some flagship stores backed by a strong brand and a central manufacture and delivery service?

When this does happen and you can then order your lunch to be delivered to your office from whoever you wish, who you gonna call?

David Rokov is a corporate strategy consultant and managing director of the ROKOV Design Group. +44 (0) 870 774 4343 - www.rokov.biz