

Understand Your Brand's Core Identifiers

through **Colors,**
Shapes,
Symbols
and **Words**



How the Mind Retains Visual Information While Shopping

Despite marketers' intuitive belief that the words on the package are the most important driver of shopper purchase intent, studies show that in fact they are the least important. Color, shapes, symbols and words, in that sequence, are what drive purchase intent. So, if you are responsible for the stewardship of your Brand's identity, and it's time to work on package design, you should build your design in a priority sequence of color, then shapes, then symbols and, lastly, words.

Today's retail environment is unlike any we have seen in history. A complexity of SKUs and POP materials bombard the shopper as never before, making it almost impossible for products to stand out and be visible on shelf. Yet, the battleground for shopper's hearts and minds is no longer on TV but in the aisle. If marketing managers want to win in this era, they must win at shelf. That means preferably a Brand Identity that was created from a strategic, disciplined and informed perspective, rather than the inherent subjectivity that brand packaging so often falls prey to.

“Colors, shapes, symbols, and then words, in that sequence, are what drive purchase intent.”

1
Color



2
★ Shape



3
Symbol



4
Word

100 Calories

20%
MORE

100%
NATURAL

NEW!

Fifty years ago, capturing shopper attention and driving brand purchase within the retail environment was a far simpler task for marketers and their brands. Small shops catered to neighborhood shoppers and carried few competitive products placed neatly on shelves. These products featured iconic design elements, combined with functional structures and single-minded messaging.

The realities of today's retail environment, however, are daunting to marketers and the success of their brands. We all know the statistic, that on average 70% of purchase decisions are made in-store. Yet the retail environment presents any number of variables that can undermine the success of a brand. More than 350,000 SKUs present in the typical retail grocery outlet, coupled with 450 units of point-of-purchase, signage and in-store media, bombard shopper senses to create an almost impossible task of navigating store aisles and shelves (not to mention out of stocks, competitive pricing, plan-o-gram changes). Research shows that shoppers can visually miss as much as one-third of products across a category², affecting even those products with high brand equity. New products typically have a failure rate of over 75%, due in part because they are often merchandised on top or bottom shelves where visibility is as much as 30% less than eye level shelves. Today, having a brand identity and design that is visible at shelf is an imperative.

¹ POPAI Shopper Buying Habits

² Perception Research Services



COLORS

Shoppers typically “ground themselves” within a 3-6 foot sub-section of the aisle in which their product’s category is shelved. Once “grounded,” studies show that on average a shopper takes only five seconds to locate and pick-up a product! This can only occur when a product is “visible,” which is defined as the relative ability to be seen under given conditions of distance, in other words, “contrast.” The physiological response driver that creates contrast is color.

According to Angela Wright, color psychologist, “color is noticed by the shopper before shapes or wording.” Color is one of the brain’s three visual pathways and, since people cannot process every object within view at one time, color becomes the mechanism to emphasize and/or de-emphasize areas of the shelf. **Figure 1** demonstrates the shelf visibility of the top three brands in the analgesic category. Blue = Advil® and Yellow = Bayer®.

In addition to shelf visibility, color can increase brand recognition by 80%³ and serve as an important brand identifier, a physical characteristic that becomes inextricably linked to the “Brand.” Think UPS®’s use of brown and its classic advertising campaign, “What can brown do for you?” Or the “purple pill” that is Nexium®. In fact, color has become such an important brand asset to companies like Cadbury and Heinz that they have managed to trademark them!

³ University of Loyola

“Color is noticed by the brand before shapes or wording.”

Figure 1



SHAPES

While color can activate on a visceral level, it is not the only element on the path to cognitive awareness and product consideration. Rudolph Arnheim, of Harvard, suggests that while color engages an innate response that triggers affective reactions in the brain, the stimulus of shape (as in the physical structure of a package or a designed iconic shape) may begin a cognitive process of product discrimination, evaluation and preference upon a shoppers' initial encounter. Shape also determines shoppers' first impressions of a product and can communicate product advantage⁴. So too will the design generate shopper inferences regarding product attributes⁵. Indeed, a 2009 shopper perception study conducted by M-real concluded that distinctive shapes increase product value by as much as 30%.

Also worth noting is the importance of not divorcing shape from the influence of color, for it must be consistently matched or product perceptions may be negatively impacted. Color and shape combinations are considered extrinsic attributes used as signals of quality, and when applied consistently enhance perception.⁶ Symmetrical shapes pair well with passive colors whereas triangular and diamond shapes pair well with active colors. Combinations can also communicate personality. So like color, the use of shape in brand identity and design goes beyond shelf visibility. Figure 2 demonstrates the power of color and shape.

⁴ Creusen & Schoorman, 2005

⁵ Berkowitz, 1987; Block, 1995

⁶ Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

“Distinctive shapes increase product value by as much as 30%.”

Figure 2



WORDS

It's probably fair to say that shoppers would find it difficult to read the words on a package from a 3-6 foot distance without picking up the package. Yet, research shows that once a product is picked-up in store it is purchased 90% of the time. (Source: Perception Research Services). So how much importance do words have in brand identity and package design?

According to Perception Research Services, less is more when it comes to claims and labeling (although labeling for many categories is a regulatory requirement with little to no flexibility). Research has shown that a package cluttered with claims, fights for attention and creates shopper conflict. Best practice is to communicate a single competitive point of difference to distinguish among a brand's own product line.

As previously discussed, colors, shapes and symbols create on-shelf visibility, the visceral reaction, the discrimination and the trust inherent in purchase intent. It stands to reason then, that the more words you add to the design, the less opportunity you have to use color, shapes and symbols.

“How much importance do words have in brand identity and package design?”

SYMBOLS

We define “symbol” as an arbitrary sign that has acquired conventional meaning and significance over time. Symbols can become an almost instantaneous form of communication and meaning. Examples of symbols include the Nike® swoosh, the CBS® eye, the Starbucks® siren and Ben & Jerry’s® cow. The proof of their ability to communicate without words is demonstrated in **Figure 3**. Can you name those brands? Of course you can! Can you describe in some detail, the features and benefits of this brand without reading the label? Of course you can! Would this be important to a marketer knowing that a shopper will spend less than five seconds before deciding to purchase? We think so.

Furthermore, the associations derived from a symbol become imprinted in a consumer’s brain as they are repeatedly exposed to the symbol and neural connections form in the brain’s pathways. Shoppers intuitively gravitate to these symbols and use them to navigate the shelf; they serve as recognizable beacons in a vast sea. A company’s brand name and trademark can also be designed in such a way as to take on the characteristics of a symbol, as **Figure 3** demonstrates.

“The associations derived from a symbol become imprinted in a consumer’s brain as they are repeatedly exposed.”

Figure 3



CLOSING THOUGHTS

Despite today's retail realities and the critical need to win at shelf, the art and science of brand identity and package design remains largely undervalued and misunderstood. In a time where so much of a product's success is out of a marketer's hands (shelf placement, breadth and depth of distribution, out of stocks, retail pricing, POP displays, store brands and manufacturer brands), package design is one of the few remaining options marketers control. Strategic and informed package design is a must-do, accomplished via a carefully engineered sequence of color, shapes, symbols and then words

The Goldstein Group is a NYC-based brand identity and package design firm whose specialty is breathing new life into America's most beloved brands. Their work reflects a disciplined approach that combines consumer and shopper insights with a design sensibility for brand heritage. Their pioneering branding approach, **ShelfSightSequence®** has leveraged the concept of color, shapes, symbols and words for brands like Bayer® aspirin, ACT® fluoride rinse and, Luden's® cough-drops. For more information, contact **Terri Goldstein**, Principal at 212.842.2887 or email: terri@thegoldsteingroup.net



A marketing strategist who for two decades has restaged America's most beloved brands, Terri is an intensely creative thinker who views brands as living, breathing entities. She is the author of breakthrough research on consumer behavior, recall and sensory motivation in the retail environment.

She has breathed new life into heritage brands such as: Heinz, PAM, Bayer Aspirin, Foster Grant, Luden's, One-A-Day, IcyHot, ACT, and Allegra. At The Goldstein Group, Terri and her team generate iconic designs and branding initiatives that are informed by past and present insights from the client, the consumer and the competition.

A frequent lecturer at industry conferences, Terri contributes regularly to such publications as Brandweek and Graphic Design USA. She is on the Board of Directors at the Scent Marketing Institute, and teaches at FIT and the Marketing Institute.