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Design & Packaging: Eco-Friendly Takes Lead Role On Marketing Stage

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The message for moving ahead in package and design in 2008: Keep on keeping it simple, stupid.

That doesn't just mean keeping text and style flourishes to a minimum. It also means creating packaging that will put less of a strain on landfills.

But simply being simple isn't that easy. This minimalism must be achieved in a distinguishable way.

"Most people are making decisions at stores in one-sixteenth of a second," said Eric Block, managing partner at Duffy & Partners, Minneapolis, whose clients have included Coca-Cola and Starbucks. "More clients are coming to us recognizing that the package form and graphic look need to differentiate from other ones on shelves, which contain more and more products each day."

Customers are exposed to more than 2,600 packaging SKUs at the average grocery store, said Cheryl Swanson, founder at New York-based Tonic, a strategy design firm whose clients have included Cadbury Schweppes and Kraft. Swanson said consumers are exposed to between 1,500-3,000 ad impressions daily, which adds up to a lot of branding overload.

"Streamlining is one way brands are optimizing their visual presence, particularly if a pared-down palette works with their brand essence and positioning," said Swanson.

The macro trend of simplicity aligns nicely with the green/organic/sustainable thinking that has increasingly directed production practices, brand messaging and package design.

"As people opt out of other [marketing] disciplines, what you communicate on the shelf is more important than ever," said Block.

Hence, recycled/renewable packaging, such as those from Seventh Generation, Burlington, Vt.—one of the nation's leading producers of nontoxic and environmentally safe household packages and products—is on the rise. And the once-ubiquitous plastic clamshell cases are shrinking, being reformulated with agricultural rather than petroleum products, or are disappearing outright. "Consumers now want sustainability built into their brands, as long as it isn't too inconvenient and companies are compelled to listen and respond," said Swanson.

In some cases, it is the retailer that is taking the lead. Wal-Mart recently mandated that vendors adhere to strict sustainability guidelines in packaging and the mass merchant has committed to reducing excess packaging on its own store brands as well.

Tesco, the U.K.-based supermarket chain that expanded into the U.S. last year with its Fresh & Easy stores, said it would list carbon footprint information on its private label packaging. Much like nutritional labels, these will detail the amount of energy expended to produce, package, transport and market each product so customers can factor in the information when making their choices.

Whether companies decide to go green or not, packaging has become "absolutely the most critical component to get right," said Barney Hughes, president of Hughes Design Group, South Norwalk, Conn. "It's the only thing that connects directly with the consumer, at the store and during the use of the product."

"Advertising opens the conversation with consumers and gets them interested," said Swanson. "Packaging has to close the deal."

—Becky Ebenkamp