

Małgorzata Lisińska-Kuśnierz

Cracow University of Economics, Faculty of Commodity Science, Department of Packaging

liskusm@uek.krakow.pl

THE VALUE OF BRAND IMAGE AND DESIGN IN SEASONAL PACKAGING¹

Abstract: Specific brand image and design associated with special occasions pertains to the so called seasonal packaging of products. The packaging of such goods can boast completely new designs, new shapes or seasonal graphics. Seasonal packaging might also be understood as slightly modified standard packaging with additional ornamental elements such as a cardboard cover with a holiday theme, supplements or a decorative bow emphasizing the idea of a gift. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a comparative study of consumer expectations relative to seasonal packaging and behaviours associated with the selection and purchase of products in such packaging as well as the image evaluation of these packages. The research material consisted of special gift chocolate products on offer before Christmas with holiday themes on product packaging, and without them. The findings of the study allow determining consumer preferences in terms of products' packaging design, selection of colours and graphic elements to be used that are strongly associated with the Christmas season. The confrontation between the consumers' expectations regarding the visual aspects of seasonal packaging and their purchasing choices of chocolate products as Christmas gifts showed the importance of brand recognition and its determining role as opposed to holiday graphics or unusual packaging shape.

Keywords: seasonal packaging, brand image, packaging image, neuromarketing research, chocolate products.

JEL classification: L66, M31.

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WARTOŚĆ WIZERUNKOWA OPAKOWAŃ OKAZJONALNYCH

Streszczenie: Specyficzny wizerunek nawiązujący do szczególnych okoliczności mają opakowania okazjonalne, zwane również świątecznymi. Opakowania takich produktów mogą mieć warstwę wizualną całkowicie okolicznościową, a więc głównie nowy kształt oraz szatę graficzną. Mogą to być opakowania z dodatkowymi elementami ozdobnymi, np. z obwolutą tekturową z grafiką odświętną, wkładką okazjonalną lub elementem podkreślającym walory upominku, np. kokardą. Celem niniejszej pracy jest przedstawienie wyników badań porównawczych oczekiwań konsumentów w stosunku do opakowań okazjonalnych, z zachowaniami związanymi z wyborem i zakupem produktów w takich opakowaniach oraz z oceną wizerunku tych opakowań. Materiał badawczy stanowiły wyroby czekoladowe stanowiące ofertę rynkową produktów o charakterze upominkowym przed świętami Bożego Narodzenia, występujące w opakowaniach z wizerunkiem oraz bez wizerunku nawiązującego do tej szczególnej okazji. Przeprowadzone badania pozwoliły na określenie preferowanych przez konsumentów konstrukcji opakowań dla tej grupy opakowań, dominujących barw oraz elementów graficznych kojarzonych ze świętami. Konfrontacja oczekiwań konsumentów odnośnie do poszczególnych elementów warstwy wizualnej opakowań okazjonalnych z wyborami i zakupem wyrobów czekoladowych jako upominków świątecznych wykazała istotną pozycję marki jako determinanty wyboru przed odświętną szatą graficzną i fantazyjnym kształtem opakowania. Ocena atrakcyjności opakowań badanej oferty rynkowej pozwoliła na dopełnienie analizy preferencji konsumentów dotyczących opakowań okazjonalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: opakowania okazjonalne, wizerunek marki, wizerunek opakowania, badania neuromarketingowe, wyroby czekoladowe.

Introduction

The retail package of a product might be defined as a planned set of signs or visual elements arranged in codes in order to inform, get the message across, and establish strategically important communication with the product's end users. These sets of signs are strongly attached to the visual aspect of the packaging and therefore should be decoded, i.e. properly understood, by the recipient of the message so that the recipient's reaction would be adequate to the one expected by the sender [Górska-Warsewicz, Świątkowska, and Krajewski 2013; Emblem and Emblem 2014].

The analysis of the possibilities of using retail packaging in marketing communication and as a promotional tool aiming at increasing sales figures is

particularly vital in establishing a certain kind of a direct contact between the consumer and the product via the packaging. Therefore, the packaging should be thus designed to ensure strong product and brand identification closely linked to the company which places the product on the market, as well as to create the desired image of the said product/brand and/or the company. Such identification means that the product or a group of products is not only singled out by the consumer from among many other substitutes, but the product has to be perceived as an attractive and encourage the potential consumer to make the purchase decision. This is the most important aim that should be met and the reason for creating the whole system of visual elements of the packaging [Moskowicz et.al. 2009; Stewart 2009; Kubera 2013].

The value of packaging as a marketing communication tool depends on the ability of the system of visual elements placed on it by the sender to convey the meaning that will trigger specific associations and, therefore, be properly decoded by the potential customer. That is why it is important to select the visual elements in a way that will ensure proper decoding by the customer, which in turn should influence a positive buying decision and foster the connotations and denotations of those elements. Denotation translates the sign to its meaning, describing either existing or imaginary reality whereas connotation interprets that reality; in other words it expresses the thoughts or emotions connected with it. The proper process of the denotation and connotation of signs should lead to a certain affective response or positive attitude towards the packaging and product, and then to the behavioural reaction demonstrated by the purchase of the product [Korzeniowski, Ankiel-Homa, and Czaja-Jagielska 2011; Górska-Warsewicz, Świątkowska, and Krajewski 2013].

The packaging image consists of the entire set of a customer's ideas, thoughts, emotions and expectations in relation to the packaging. This is shaped by the visual elements of the packaging. The elements can be divided into ones conveying basic and additional information. The visual elements pertaining to basic signs are: construction form, shape, size, material and colour. Every packaging needs to have those elements in order to physically exist. Additional signs do not constitute the packaging per se; however, they are of great importance as tools that convey certain messages. Such signs are graphic and the written elements of packaging [Ankiel-Homa 2012].

The overall image of the packaging is determined by the features and attributes pertaining to that particular packaging, then by the emotions it stirs and the attitudes towards the packaging it creates. Very commonly, a potential customer transfers the image of the packaging onto the product, brand and the company that sells it. Such image transfer means that the perception of

the packaging and its attributes as well as the emotions it stirs and attitudes it creates is merged with the image, emotions and attitudes associated with the product and/or its brand [Lisińska-Kuśnierz 2013; Han 2014].

Polish consumers are generally speaking rather conservative. A good example proving this assertion in the field of confectionery is their full of reserve attitude or even open reluctance towards buying new products. Manufacturers are aware of the fact that the visual elements and packaging design are of vital importance here in terms of purchase decision. According to some of the key companies in this branch of industry, the packaging – especially in case of premium quality products – triggers sales and determines the sales figures to a large extent. As many as 80–94% of the companies in the research pointed to the visual quality of the packaging, its size and brand image themed on it are crucial factors considered by customers while making the purchase decisions of confectionary goods. All of the surveyed companies underline the importance of the product's price as another factor taken into consideration by the consumer. In contrast, consumers themselves believe that the packaging does not play an important role in the purchase decision as opposed to brand recognition or the product's price. The vast majority (83%) of respondents find the product's price important or very important, 76% report that the brand is of greater importance to them. Only about 50% of respondents considered the visual aspects of packaging and its size very important or important when buying confectionery goods.

The results presented above come from the research report of 2014 on confectionery goods and industry and they do not include a real-life option – confectionery products bought as gifts. The visual elements of the packaging of such products tend to be very important here and in such cases consumers usually make prudent and careful choices [Rynek 2014].

1. Experimental

The study was conducted in three stages. The first stage focused on consumer preferences in terms of different elements of packaging design among special gift chocolate products sold as a seasonal product. The second stage of the study focused on consumer behavioural patterns while selecting products from the so called 'store shelf' containing various chocolate products of several brands. This part of the research was conducted with the use of an Eyetracker and special software to analyse the above-mentioned patterns. The third stage of the study focused on the evaluation of individual elements of image and

design in pre-selected chocolate products with the use of a specially developed scoring card.

The first stage of the empirical study focused on a group of consumers residing in southern Poland and falling into different age-groups. As many as 300 customers took part in the survey, 60% of whom were women and 40% men. The research tool used in the study was a questionnaire survey. The survey as a research tool contained closed – ended multiple – choice questions as well as open – ended questions. The questionnaire was developed according to rules specified in the related literature [Thomas 2007; Eastics 2009].

The questions related to: willingness to buy boxes of chocolate in seasonal packaging, factors determining purchases such as price and brand, consumers' expectations in terms of the visual aspects of seasonal packaging as well as basic and additional information being conveyed by them. Consumers' expectations were expressed by choosing their level of acceptability of different elements of packaging (unacceptable, indifferent, low-, medium-, high – and very high – level of acceptability).

Thirty respondents (equal participation of men and women) took part in the study of consumers' behaviour while selecting the final product from among the confectionery goods mentioned above as well as in the assessment of particular visual elements of products' packaging.

The second stage of the research was conducted with the use of EyeTracker type X2–60 fitted with Tobii Studio 3.2 software and in accordance with the research plan [*An introduction* 2010]. The aim here was to determine which visual elements of packaging, and in what order, potential consumers focus on and might be interested in. All the products were presented on a specially constructed shelved-stand to ensure heat-mapping during the process of selection of three potential products as gifts for loved ones. The heat-maps thus captured and showed participants' intensity of attention and how deeply they actually focused on different products. The bright red colour stands for particularly long time intervals of looking at a product whereas yellow means a much shorter time interval and the green colour very little interest in a given product [Świda and Kabaja 2013].

The third stage of the empirical study focused on the assessment of visual elements of packaging through a point-scale that would show the level of acceptability of different visual elements and the product's price. The score-card included the following: construction type, shape, type of packaging material used, size, plastic film cover, dominating colour, font colour against the dominating colour, graphic elements, product description, logo and specific features of some of the products such as: special wrappers with seasonal graphic design,

overlays featuring seasonal messages and decorations, and special content (windows) visible in the principal field of vision. Different levels of acceptability were matched with different points on the scale in order to facilitate the calculation of average values. Total lack of acceptability was matched with – 0 pts on the scale, very low level – 1 point, low – 2 pts, medium – 3 pts, high – 4 pts, very high – 5 pts. As a result the assessment of the level of acceptability ranged between 0 and 5 pts. The assessors were then asked to choose the boxes of chocolates they were most likely to buy considering the visual elements of the packaging and the product's price.

The research material in the second and third stage of the empirical study consisted of 10 boxes of chocolates offered by eight different manufacturers before Christmas. Confectionery goods with and without seasonal themes were analysed. Among those products in seasonal packaging were brands such as: Niederegger (Marzipan Pralines), Figaro (Dessert Liqueur Cappuccino/Coconut), Solidarność (Chocolate Creations), Krakowski Kredens (Christmas Nougat Pralines) and Ritter SPORT (two different examples of seasonal packaging, Milk Chocolate Mix). The products in standard packaging (without Christmas themes) were: E. Wedel (From the Heart and Liquor Barrels – barrel-shaped chocolates filled with liquor), Storck (Merci) and Lindt (Assorted bag).

2. Results and discussion

The analysis of the survey revealed that consumers mostly chose among products with seasonal themed packaging when they were planning to purchase a product as a present to be given to another person together with Christmas wishes. As many as 73% of the respondents stated thus. 82% of women would choose a seasonal themed product on such an occasion as opposed to 57.5% of men. The brand and the product's price were also of particular importance while selecting goods from the store shelf. Only about 12% of respondents believed those were not important factors while making purchase decisions. Over 50% of women and 72% of men considered price to be important or very important. An established position of the product's brand as a factor determining the buying decision was clearly more important than the price. According to the research it was important or very important to ca. 69% of women and 85% of men. The results point to a lot of brand awareness among confectionery goods consumers.

The assessment of visual elements of packaging as signs carrying basic and additional information was then conducted. It should be underlined that the construction form of all chocolate products in the study were boxes; which, however, differed in terms of shape, type of construction, colour and other elements. In the first step, the respondents selected their levels of acceptability of different types of packs: with a lid, with compartments, with the construction allowing seeing the product, protected with a plastic film cover, or packs in unusual shapes (e.g. a Christmas tree, a heart, a star etc.). Standard packaging with a lid received the best marks. Over 61% of women and ca. 77% of men rated that type of packaging as highly acceptable. The packaging with a sliding lower part was not considered attractive to both male and female respondents. Over 17% pointed out that this type of packaging was completely indifferent to them whereas 53% of respondents gave it low marks. The unusual shape of packaging attracted more women than men. That type of packaging received high and very high marks among ca. 53% of women and was considered indifferent by only 11.5% of women, but as many as 65% of male respondents. Respondents were particularly interested in the packaging type which made the interior and the product at least partly visible. Women also preferred the window type construction. An additional plastic film wrap protecting the product and giving it additional visual value was important to 64% of men, but only 12% of women. It can be thus supposed that, generally speaking, an additional plastic film wrap does not translate to better product image or a protective attribute among consumers [Lisińska-Kuśnierz 2013].

The respondents pointed to the importance of the type of packaging material from which the boxes were made. It was proven to be important to as many as 61% respondents and only ca. 13% believed it was not important at all. The respondents preferred cardboard packaging to metal boxes. One of the most crucial attributes of the packaging was its size, especially relative to the weight of the product inside, which was important to over 70% of the respondents.

Colour is universally acknowledged as one of the key elements of the visual aspect of packaging [Stewart 2009]. That is why the respondents were asked to assess different sets of colours which usually dominate in the seasonal range of boxes of chocolates. The level of acceptability of several dominating colours, such as: white with gold, white with red, different shades of red, blue with gold, different shades of blue, and green with gold were all assessed. The best marks were given to: white with gold, white with red, different shades of red, and green with gold. Those colour sets are most likely strongly associated with Christmas. From among the sets mentioned above, only white with gold

was attractive to fewer men than women. Colour sets with blue proved to be completely indifferent to the respondents.

Additional visual elements of packaging are graphic and written signs. According to the survey results, the respondents would like to see graphic elements associated with the chocolates in the principal field of vision or on the back cover of the packaging. 70% of women and 57.5% of men pointed to that whereas 27% of men did not accept any graphic elements associated with chocolates on the product's cover.

The seasonal packaging, its recognition and customers' positive attitude towards it, might be enhanced by the graphic elements associated with Christmas. The respondents' suggestions differed significantly, but they focused mostly on the following elements: snow, snowflakes, stars, Christmas trees, snowmen and Santa Claus. It should be added, however, that as many as 35% of men and over 12% of women would never buy a box of chocolates as a gift if the packaging contained any such elements.

Graphic and written elements of particular importance to consumers are also: the brand logo and product information, namely the list of ingredients which, according to the survey, is important or very important to 85% of women and ca. 70% of men. Expiry date was marked important or very important by 92% of women and 75% of men. The brand logo received 80% and 90% of the top marks, respectively. The research results are consistent with the previously obtained results of the assessment of factors determining the buying decision, especially in terms of confectionery goods. The boxes of chocolates purchased as gifts are chosen carefully and the image of the packaging is reinforced by the products' brand image.

The results of neuromarketing research conducted in the second stage of the study (heat-mapping) led to the following conclusions. The participants of the EyeTracking tests looked at each single box of chocolates for a particular time interval. One of the most interesting outcomes of the research was the fact that the participants seemed to perceive certain boxes differently. The lowest level of interest was generated by the seasonal graphic elements of the Niederegger product packaging. One of the reasons here might be the fact that the image of the packaging was mostly shaped by the construction and small size, with dominating colours (red and white) and several Christmas elements. The highest level of interest (red spots on the heat-map) was generated by Merci chocolates in only standard packaging without seasonal elements. Two products from the E. Wedel family came in second. They were also in standard packaging. Next on the list were the Ritter SPORT chocolates in the red star-shaped packaging with standard graphic elements.

On being instructed to select three products the participants would buy as gifts for their loved ones, the heat-maps changed distinctly. Smaller boxes of chocolates such as Niederegger, Ritter SPORT (sleigh-shaped box) and Krakowski Kredens (Christmas tree-shaped box) were mostly ignored, and nobody selected them even once. Perhaps the reason here was the fact that all the three boxes were small in size, or they might have had graphic elements or construction which was not considered particularly attractive. The products did not evoke emotions that would lead to the selection of these particular goods. The seasonal packaging of products offered by Figaro and Solidarność triggered more interest, but that did not affect the selection/buying decision. The highest level of interest was generated by the boxes of chocolates offered by Storck (Merci), E. Wedel and Lindt. None of the above-mentioned came in seasonal packaging. It might be therefore argued that what matters mostly is brand recognition and brand loyalty combined with shopping habits.

The results obtained in the third stage of the study allowed an in-depth analysis of the levels of acceptability of particular visual elements of products' packaging as well as the participants' attitudes towards the price. The average value of the levels of acceptability of visual elements (seasonal packaging) as well as price are presented in Table 1. whereas the results for products in standard packaging are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. The assessment of the levels of acceptability (pts) of visual elements and price (boxes of chocolates with seasonal themes – A)

Visual elements	The levels of acceptability (pts)					
	Packaging no. 1 A	Packaging no. 2 A	Packaging no. 3 A	Packaging no. 4 A	Packaging no. 5 A	Packaging no. 6 A
Construction type	2.7	4.2	4.0	2.7	3.3	4.0
Packaging material	3.7	4.2	4.5	2.9	4.3	4.4
Size	4.2	4.9	4.6	1.3	3.8	3.4
Product description	3.1	3.6	4.0	2.5	3.4	3.4
Graphic elements	1.8	3.6	3.8	3.6	4.2	4.0
Dominating colour	3.5	3.6	4.3	3.3	4.0	4.0
Font colour against the dominating colour	4.1	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5	4.4
Logo of brand	3.3	4.0	4.2	2.8	4.3	4.2
Plastic film cover	4.1	4.1	4.6	–	–	–
Product's price	2.3	4.6	4.7	3.6	3.1	3.8

- Below the description of different products' packaging:
- Packaging no. 1 A – Niederegger, cardboard box, side opening, seasonal wrap with several Christmas elements, a so called 'window' allowing to look inside and see the content; dominating colours: white with red, wrapped in transparent film.
 - Packaging no. 2 A – Figaro, cardboard box, top opening, seasonal graphic elements; dominating colours: blue with gold, wrapped in transparent film.
 - Packaging no. 3 A – Solidarność, cardboard box, top opening, overlay with seasonal graphic elements, a textile bow, graphic elements presenting the content of the box; dominating colours: white with gold, wrapped in transparent film.
 - Packaging no. 4 A – Krakowski Kredens, a Christmas tree-shaped metal box, seasonal graphic elements; dominating colours: green with gold.
 - Packaging no. 5 A – Ritter SPORT, cardboard box, star-shaped construction, graphic elements presenting the content of the box and seasonal elements; dominating colours: red with white.
 - Packaging no. 6 A – Ritter SPORT, cardboard box, sleigh-shaped construction, graphic elements and colours as in Packaging no. 5 A.

Table 2. The assessment of the levels of acceptability (pts) of visual elements and price (boxes of chocolates without seasonal themes – B)

Visual elements	The levels of acceptability (pts)			
	Packaging no. 1 B	Packaging no. 2 B	Packaging no. 3 B	Packaging no. 4 B
Construction type	4.3	4.4	4.6	3.4
Packaging material	4.2	4.2	4.1	3.8
Size	3.8	4.0	4.1	4.2
Product description	3.9	4.3	4.2	2.9
Graphic elements	3.3	4.0	4.6	3.3
Dominating colour	2.7	4.2	4.8	2.3
Font colour against the dominating colour	4.1	4.0	4.8	1.4
Logo of brand	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
Plastic film cover	4.5	4.2	4.3	–
Product's price	4.5	4.0	2.8	3.3

- Below the description of different products' packaging:
- Packaging no. 1 B – E. Wedel, product name: From the Heart, cardboard box, top opening, a square top surface, graphic elements presenting the content of the box; dominating colours: different shades of red, wrapped in transparent film.

- Packaging no. 2 B – E. Wedel, product name: Liquor Barrels; dominating colours: red with gold, other elements as in Packaging no. 1 B.
- Packaging no. 3 B – Storck (Merci), cardboard box, top opening, the largest in size, graphic elements presenting the content of the box; dominating colours: white with red and gold, wrapped in transparent film.
- Packaging no. 4 B – Lindt, cardboard box, bag-shaped solid construction, 'window' allowing seeing the contents of the box, graphic elements presenting the content; dominating colours: green with white and gold.

The analysis of the obtained results helped to determine the final ranking of the most preferred types of packaging. Considering the number of elements which received the average marks of at least 4 points, i.e. at least the high level of acceptability, and the image value which stands for the total sum of all analysed elements, the final ranking was thus construed. Among the boxes of chocolates with seasonal elements, first place went to the product offered by Solidarność. It received high acceptability levels in eight out of nine assessed elements. Only the graphic elements presenting the content of the box and seasonal elements obtained medium levels of acceptability. Among the boxes of chocolates without seasonal elements, first place went to the products offered by Storck (Merci) and E. Wedel (packaging no. 2 B). They received high acceptability levels in all analysed aspects. All of the above-mentioned brands showed over 85% in ratings of particular visual elements of the boxes. Among the boxes of chocolates with seasonal elements offered by Figaro and Ritter SPORT as well as the products offered by E. Wedel (without seasonal elements on the box, packaging no. 1 B) high acceptability levels were observed in five or six different assessed elements and the average rating was above 70% of the maximum visual value. All of the boxes obtained levels of high acceptability.

The assessment of the levels of acceptability of each of the assessed products and the final ranking of consumer preferences allowed to draw conclusions in terms of the importance of the brand and/or visual elements of the packaging before the price, as one of the key factors determining a careful buying decision (here: a product bought as a gift).

Conclusions

Finally, it can be concluded that the consumers who participated in the study strongly accepted traditional construction forms of packaging i.e. cardboard boxes opened at the top, relatively large in size, wrapped in transparent film, containing graphic elements that would allow to inspect the interior and the

product inside, with possible seasonal elements, but presented in a subtle and simple way. The assessment of particular boxes of chocolates proved consumer preferences that had already been revealed in the survey on colour and font colour preferences. The consumers stated that they oftentimes looked for boxes of chocolates that would serve as Christmas gifts; however, a particularly low or medium acceptability level of the visual elements discouraged them from buying products in seasonal packaging.

The research results point to the differences in product image and design expectations of consumers depending on their gender. The confrontation between the consumers' expectations regarding the visual aspects of seasonal packaging and their purchasing choices of chocolate products as Christmas gifts showed the importance of brand recognition and its determining role as opposed to holiday graphics or unusual packaging shape. The assessment of the packaging attractiveness of the examined products complemented the analysis of consumer preferences for seasonal packaging. The study carried out based on the adopted scenario helped to identify the determinants shaping the image of so called seasonal packaging associated with Christmas.

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