



The complete package

The key attributes of product packaging may mean different things for different companies, depending on where you are in the supply chain.

As Martin Fejk, managing director at Tetra Pak Arabia observes, high production costs for brands means charging customers more. Packaging innovation is therefore predominantly driven by the most efficient way to package and distribute the product. For distributors, the product should also be sturdy enough to avoid damage and minimise returns – a merchandising killer. For retailers, the benefits lie in a product that can be moved around the store easily, stacked quickly and displayed well, he continues. Summing it all up is the consumer, whose own priority remains in affordability, availability and convenience. In any event, with what can often be in excess of 20,000 items on a supermarket's shelves, packaging is king.

Simon Clough, packaging development manager at consulting firm, Dunes, Dubai, refers to the 'three-second sell'. "The consumer has three seconds to see your promotional message, understand your promotional message and decide whether they will buy the product," he says.

Both functionality and the impact-on-shelf factor are crucial, agrees a

representative from supermarket chain, Spinneys. "A product should be able to tell the same story on its side as it can standing up," she offers. Brands she cites that offer functionality and convenience include Dilmah tea that is sold in re-sealable, reusable tins, or Sheba's individual-portion cat food range that prevents waste and gives the impression of freshness.

A convenient choice

As explained by Iain Potter, vice president - home and personal care at Unilever North Africa and Middle East, the consumer trend towards convenience packaging is likely to continue. First, the increase in the number of households, but with lower occupant numbers, has resulted in a growing preference for individual portions and personal pack sizes. Second, the increase in the number of working women has led to more affluence but less time for meal preparation. Last, the breakdown of the traditional family unit has resulted in more informal eating and food purchasing patterns.

"We are seeing much more

differentiation within the same product range," concurs Fejk. He cites Danone, with its small format milk and juice-mix line designed for young people on the go, and larger format designed to pour out larger volumes for family use. It is the stronger regional brands that distribute across borders which also have the greatest ability to innovate, he continues. Such companies are also developing their own packaging niches. Saudi brand, Al Rabia, is the leader in portion packs for kids for example, while Kuwait-based KDD leads the market in lighter-packaged, less-waste cream cartons.

For Clough however, innovation within the region is still restricted. This, he feels, is due to the limited number of packaging suppliers and the lack of investment in new machinery by both packaging suppliers and users. "I think that the majority are still a long way off (compared to) Europe, Asia or North America," he comments.

For retailers as always, presentation is key. "Merchandisers should be trained to display cartons in the best way – the right way up and displaying the face that should be shown," adds Mark

Broad from Kenwood Middle East. From his observation, this tends to be stronger with brands that have their own merchandisers. The danger for retailers however, is that while this might boost the sales one brand, it could equally lower the sales of a competitive product that is less-effectively merchandised.

Also, contrary to the more 'touch and feel' aspect of merchandising in the west, a lot of products in Middle East stores do not come out of the carton, so the packaging has to tell the whole story. Broad cites the Saudi Arabian, Damascus and Tehran markets as particular examples. "This doesn't always give the best impression. It may not showcase the features and functions, or the size of the photograph on the carton may be misleading," he feels. In contrast is the minimalist packaging of the Kenwood kMix which, when you open the box, also offers a welcome to the consumer and an instruction DVD.

Certainly, many would argue that less is more from an environmental point of view. According to the trade body, INCPEN, packaging constitutes around 15 to 20 percent of global household waste in terms of weight. Yet, even with

friendliness of packaging machinery will also be under scrutiny. Deploying water-recovery units, already used by Tetra Pak, may not only save water, but also "goes back to efficiency – to produce more at less cost," he offers.

Internationally, the move towards greener packaging continues with research into areas such as biodegradable plastics. WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) is continuing trials with brands such as Boots, Coca-Cola and Marks & Spencer to reduce the weight of the PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles commonly used for soft drinks or bath products. According to WRAP, each year in the UK alone, 510,000 tons of plastic bottles enter the waste stream. The company is carrying out similar trials with Heinz to reduce the thickness of can ends – already estimated to be saving the brand 14,000 tons of steel and 585 tons of carbon emissions a year. UK supermarket chain, Asda, has reportedly developed a re-sealable, part recyclable packet for its cooked meats – combining recyclability with minimising food waste for the first time. Iceland's new 'boxless, foil flow-wrap' design has brought down the packaging weight of its pizzas from

growth of bacteria and other microbes) or preservatives." The trend in convenience foods is also leading to significant developments in safe packaging materials for microwave and other 'heat and eat' applications.

One aspect particularly relevant to the Middle East has been language. Observes Clough, "being from the UK, the majority of packaging is single language. In this region it is at least two, so one needs to ensure that the main face of the packaging is balanced and not too busy. We do this by either suggesting a dual facing if the pack allows (English on one face and Arabic on the other), or careful use of what actually goes on the main face.

Finally, packaging may offer the best opportunity for brands to fend off the scourge of modern industry – piracy. "It is estimated that as much as five percent of world trade is in counterfeit products," Potter informs. "The challenge for manufactures is to make products hard to copy. This includes the use of holograms, anti-scanning and copy artwork design." Packaging may not only be a predominant guide to consumer purchasing habits, but may also become the key to product authenticity.

Merchandisers should be trained to display cartons in the best way

fruit and vegetables there is a noticeable rise in conveniently small quantities wrapped and bar coded. As observed by Nils El Accad, CEO of Dubai-based organic retailer, Organic Foods & Café, "there used to be a lot more bulk bins. Even in organic, products are going much more to the mainstream – more consumer-friendly, but less environmentally-friendly."

Emerging trends

According to Fejk however, greener packaging will be the next emerging trend in the region – although it is still in its infancy. Following European trends, there is already a move within the UAE to phase out the use of carrier bags. In 2009, he observes, UAE suppliers will be under additional pressure to recycle their waste responsibly. The environmental-

74 to 33 kilogrammes, while saving the consumer freezer space.

Environmental trends also extend to safety concerns. "We have seen an increase in the use of tamper evident and child resistant packaging for products such as pharmaceuticals," says Potter. "In developed economies, ageing populations also influence package designs as this trend of secure, safe packaging needs to be balanced with the needs for easier opening and handling ergonomics.

"The growing demand for fresh products such as meat, poultry, fish or fruit is enabled through packaging that is specifically developed to control the atmosphere within the package to maximise shelf life," Potter continues. "These materials may be even further enhanced with an inclusion of anti-microbial substances (that inhibit the

