



Deceit of Packaging

Thirty-eight years ago, Rich Silverstein, who, like me, was a recent Parsons graduate, told me that he had to come to grips with the notion that, “Not everything in my house has to be well-designed.” Although I admired him as a designer and sensed the struggle in his decision, this was heresy to my young mind and I figured many of my design-obsessed colleagues would be shocked as well.

Thirty years later, I designed the interior of my little nineteenth-century house in Brooklyn. The overall attitude: country, nature. The interior palette: contrasting pale and bright buttery yellow and rich terra cotta. Lots of bead board, wide plank pine floors. Much of the furniture is upholstered in huge florals. Outsider art is on the walls. You get the picture. The usual response is exclaimed in delight, “It doesn’t even feel like you’re in the City!” I smile. Confirmation I have successfully packaged my home. And, of course, that is because the design of every little thing in it has been considered.

A few months ago, I had to choose between two brands of canned tuna on the store shelf, both new to me: one with an anemic photo of chunks of tuna, lousy typography; the other regal in gold and black. Nice type. No photo. I drew back my hand as it automatically reached for beauty, paused, compared the two packages for substance (ignoring style) and, ultimately, selected the haplessly designed one. Then I took a moment to consider my erroneous initial prejudice: poor packaging = clueless manufacturer = inferior content. I realized my struggle to make substance a priority and to allow ugly into my house. Also, that I am a design addict and Silverstein was right, we can go too far in surrounding ourselves with design.

In the broadest sense, everything packaged is designed. The definition of packaging is “the manner in which something, such as a proposal or product, or someone, such as a candidate or author, is presented to the public.”¹ That’s what designers do: design the visual expression of “packages” to be presented to the public. And there is power and responsibility in that role.

The mom factor

In the world of commerce, dumbing-down or smartening-up starts with budding consumers, the kids. And also often with the moms. It’s mom who is at the front gate. She’s the sole

decision-maker until the child turns six and begins to express preferences. Then mothers have to tell their children *why* they can/can’t have what they want. So the package has to attract both moms and kids. Children are attracted on a visual level—color, coolness and visuals. Moms are more discerning, reading the copy (written with moms in mind)—and then researching online (kids may do this, too, at a shockingly young age) to find and compare products. The role of packaging is to validate the product.

Of course, not all moms are engaged in monitoring and guiding their children’s buying habits nor are they necessarily critical thinkers, and we know kids without guidance may grow up to be easy targets for alcohol, cigarettes and the endless forms of recreational products that have historically been packaged and marketed to vulnerable teens: cool, colorful and visual.

Fuel for our fantasy lives

We package water and sell it. In most parts of America, where we have untainted water, this is utterly ludicrous; in parts of the world, where tap water is dangerously contaminated, this is absolutely essential. But the market for bottled water in the U.S. provides the consumer a far greater variety than much of the world—Fiji, Appalachian Springs, Sierra Springs—are just some of the hundreds of brands that entertain us with their fantasy images, suggesting that their waters are especially pure, from some utopian world. But recently the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) studied 1,000 bottled waters and found 25 percent merely package tap water. At any rate, all these waters take a valuable resource away from the people who live nearby in a time when water is becoming increasingly precious. Not to mention that the plastic used in packaging is petroleum-based and that the filled water bottles have to be trucked (more petroleum), often long distances. And, for these reasons, both the scarcity of water and the selling of packaged water have become hot political issues. Yet this is a boom business, with more people drinking bottled water than beer.

Ethos, the “ethical” bottled water company, was started in 2002 by social activists Peter Thum and Jonathan Greenblatt,

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in Greenblatt's son's bedroom. The goal was to use part of the profits to help get clean water to the people who are struggling for the lack it. Ethos was purchased by Starbucks in 2005. Ironically Starbucks sells its product (which *is* mostly water) at an egregious mark up.² Since coffee is addictive, Starbucks selling Ethos is kind of like a heroin dealer urging his clients to donate to Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

Nevertheless, Greenblatt sits on the board of Starbucks Foundation and has projected that more than \$10 million will be devoted to clean water in underdeveloped countries by 2010. And there is a lot of transparency about where that money is going. This is a good thing.

And God banished His favored angel Satan from Heaven

Contradiction is alive and well. Just as Starbucks (named after a "virtuous" Quaker—a character in Melville's *Moby Dick*) may be seen as "sinful"³ and yet promote virtue through Ethos, so does "bad" Wal-Mart⁴ promote good, ethical packaging standards. This is, of course, not altruism, it is survival.

Years ago, I taught the ethics of graphic design in the master's program at Pratt. The syllabus was a hands-on approach to ethical decision-making since ethics is very practical and not

black or white. It is about social progress which is ultimately in our self-interest. The class was, sadly, often cancelled since only the progressive students wanted to take this elective course and that doomed it to be chronically under-enrolled.

Designer Ann Willoughby, of Willoughby Design Group in Kansas City, designs products and packaging for clients that sell to Wal-Mart. She says, "Wal-Mart has had a report card for all vendors packaging elements. This includes shelf space and wastefulness. They have modeling software that leads designers to design more sustainable products and packaging. Vendors are also given an incentive to use this since they get a break if they follow it. If Wal-Mart can help transform industrial manufacturing, energy consumption and reduce carbon within its supply chain and for its customers, wouldn't it serve everyone's self-interest?"

In time we will be able to scan everything we need to know about a product in the store. Encouraging consumers to be more aware of what they are buying.

Delicate balance

Packaging can make ideas accessible to people in a good way when it is the truth played back. Willoughby says, "Given all the gains in technology that make products more desirable



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and appealing, we certainly have the ability to make them healthier, more sustainable and informative. Should companies wait for consumer pressure or legislation to do what is likely good marketing anyway? Desirability and sustainability are not necessarily mutually exclusive. That said, it is harder for industries like oil, tobacco, conglomerates and politicians to pull this off, but not impossible. We just haven't seen it yet." And, certainly, consumers would be right to be skeptical if historically deceitful industries suddenly clean up their acts. "It takes more time to read, appreciate, make a judgment and even then you're never quite sure." Willoughby continues, "We need to be able to trust what we see much more as consumers." She asks, somewhat rhetorically, "Will greater transparency and access to verifiable facts (i.e., searchable technology) about a candidate, country or product increase trust and brand value? Will it raise the bar for brands in general and punish those that ignore the trend?"

Nicholas Negroponte has succeeded in developing a beautifully packaged, very straightforward computer (with wireless Internet) for school-age children in developing countries. Each computer costs \$100. He's looking for donations. His mission is simple and it is elegantly "packaged" as One Laptop Per Child (OLPC): 100% inspiration; 0% manipulation.

Packaging = Deceit?

Packaging: The manner in which something, such as a proposal or product, or someone, such as a candidate or author, is presented to the public. This includes much more than tuna fish and pantyhose:

- Starlets are packaged. Their names are often changed to reflect the persona they wish to project—the blonde Hannah Montana is actually the brunette Miley Stewart who is actually Miley Cyrus who is actually Destiny Hope Cyrus.
- Politicians are packaged to make them understandable to the lowest common denominator of the population, often simplistically labeled "reformer," "liberal," "elitist," "maverick."
- News is packaged every day—including logos or names like "storm of the century" and "the Unabomber."
- Political actions are packaged with leaders named 'czars' and titles like the "war on drugs" and "war on poverty."
- Anything that needs to reach a wide audience with a consistent message to be followed over time, may go through a packaging process.



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OLPC computer designed by Fuseproject. This laptop has a swivel top so that the computer screen can lie flat or be tilted. In a Nigerian village, a girl carries her laptop .

Negroponte founded and ran MIT's Media Lab for years and is an investor in both *Wired* and Skype. He also sits on the board of Motorola. In developing his laptop for kids, he is operating on the premise that only an educated, savvy population can push the world forward. And that a lot of the information people need is available to all, often for no cost, through the Internet.

Politifact, TruthORFiction, Snopes and online encyclopedias are just some of the myriad of reliable free tools available to anyone who can get online to separate fact from fiction. The fact that kids tend to embrace technology with gusto bodes well for this effort. And learning how to navigate the Net certainly is, in itself, a road to developing critical thinking and discretion since the good stuff is often found (like life in

From Angst to Zen...



LEFT: ROGER VAN DER WEYDEN. DETAIL FROM THE LAST JUDGMENT, 1434. PHOTO: ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY
RIGHT: AKSHOBYA BUDDHA. TIBET, 13TH C. PHOTO: THE NEWARK MUSEUM/ART RESOURCE, NY

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general) in the midst of a minefield of distorted realities. Adult guidance is key, since too much freedom on the Internet may put unsuspecting children in jeopardy.

An uneducated citizen is our best customer

Packaging is a different animal in politics than it is in the consumer arena. As in jury selection, an uneducated citizen is often preferred to an educated one. Too much thinking for yourself can gum up the works. There is a prevalent child-like tendency to accept an oft-repeated, over-simplified statement as fact (as in the recent presidential campaign) even though, with just a little probing, sound bites start to become Swiss cheese. Indeed, it's been said that many politicians are convinced the electorate doesn't listen; so they dumb-down ad campaigns by literally turning off the volume on the television to make sure the visual says it all.

Creative director Sharoz Makarechi, principal of the advertising agency Think Tank 3, says, "Truth can be the first casualty in larger political advertising campaigns, which is often reactive, and usually created by political strategists and public relations folks. Campaign managers don't usually, to my knowledge, tap into top design and advertising talent as we know it...taking a position that, while we creatives understand consumers, they understand voters. I maintain that we're all talking to people. That, despite the short shelf life of political campaigns, despite the quick reflexes necessary to respond to attack ads, representing candidates as accurately as possible, packaging them, if you will, is a privilege and a responsibility. It's up to citizens to demand as much as they want to know."

Makarechi adds, "The 2008 presidential campaign, despite the unprecedented nature of the ticket on each side, quickly turned into politics as usual. The packaging, in this case, was more obviously transparent than in past years given that the Democrats had a unique man in Barack Obama, and the Republicans had a woman in Sarah Palin. It was a bit more about how the packaging was advertised. Where the Republicans had no problem playing dirty, in my opinion,



This version of Shepard Fairey's omnipresent Obama poster incorporates his ubiquitous Obey the Giant logo inside the Obama logo (both logos like Obama the man, are Rorschachs); the viewer, Phenomenology says, chooses between a positive or negative mindset since a circle could mean unity (hope) or the opposite, naught (hopelessness). See <http://obeygiant.com/post/manifesto>.

the Democrats chose to treat voters with a little more respect, using intellectual retaliation, which was like showing up to a gun fight with a knife."

The packaging for the Barack Obama presidential campaign was, in general, pure genius. Its branding system, designed by Sol Sender, of Sender LLC in Chicago, focused on the Obama O as the core icon, standing for hope and unity, making Obama the only candidate in years to have a symbol other than an eagle or star (top left).

The Obama campaign system had a lot of flexibility and allowed for some fun with a variety of brand extensions both in product lines and promotion. Some of the most beautiful images of the 2008 campaign were created ad hoc, by artists Antar Dayal, Scott Hansen and Shepard Fairey. That artists felt free to interpret this brand was testament to the open-minded intelligence of Obama the man, who welcomed all comers, supporters and naysayers alike.

Educated voters = healthier society

I discussed the education challenges we face in the U.S. recently with my two sisters, Jennifer Holland, an early childhood educator, and Cecelia Holland, a writer and historian, who often contributes to this column. Jennifer says, "In the nineteenth century, education was considered vital for a democracy.

Only well-educated voters could think critically about the important issues of the day. This was the philosophic basis of the public education system. However, in the 1970s, as part of the broad reevaluation of government funding for the public good, which we now call Reaganomics, federal support for public school education came under fire. Maintaining an educated electorate across all economic classes was no longer considered valuable enough to pay for."

Long term in a democracy, a population that is unaware and ill-informed is a disaster, since if a large portion of the electorate isn't challenged (and taught) to think critically, it won't advance. Cecelia says, "Thinking is a solitary act. Being an intellectual in this country is like being in exile without even leaving home. History shows that democracies tend to degenerate into mob rule ultimately leading to a form of government

12 Steps on the Graphic Designer's Road to Hell

by Milton Glaser

Designing a package to look bigger on the shelf.

Designing an ad for a slow, boring film to make it seem like a lighthearted comedy.

Designing a crest for a new vineyard to suggest that it has been in business for a long time.

Designing a jacket for a book whose sexual content you find personally repellent.

Designing a medal using steel from the World Trade Center to be sold as a profit-making souvenir of September 11.

Designing an advertising campaign for a company with a history of known discrimination in minority hiring.

Designing a package aimed at children for a cereal whose contents you know are low in nutritional value and high in sugar.

Designing a line of T-shirts for a manufacturer that employs child labor.

Designing a promotion for a diet product that you know doesn't work.

Designing an ad for a political candidate whose policies you believe would be harmful to the general public.

Designing a brochure for an SUV that flips over frequently in emergency conditions and is known to have killed 150 people.

Designing an ad for a product whose frequent use could result in the user's death.

An excerpt from "The Road to Hell" by Milton Glaser, *Metropolis* August/September 2002.

not controlled by the people: fascism, despotism. Mob rule operates according to the lowest common denominator of the intelligence of its parts." The only hope of a democracy is to raise the denominator through improving education, as Jennifer suggests, encouraging fluid, yet disciplined, thinking. "No democracy has survived for very long," continues Cecelia, "We hold the world survival record. Athens lasted only 50 years." There are currently 123 fledgling democracies in the world (there were only 40 in 1972). An encouraging fact: In the history of the World, no democracy has ever attacked another democracy. Hypothetically then, if the world were made up entirely of democracies would war between nations cease to be a threat?

Is the overall intelligence of Americans improving or declining? The movie satire, *Idiocracy* was set 500 years from now.

America had devolved into a nation full of logo-clad cretins in a state of starvation and chaos, led by a nitwit president. The film played on our worst fear: that the dumbing-down of our society may, in fact, be happening right before our eyes.

Making promises you can't deliver

After a 38-year hiatus, I lunched with Rich Silverstein just the other day. He is now co-founder, co-chairman and creative director of San Francisco advertising agency Goodby, Silverstein & Partners. He didn't remember his revelation of so long ago—that design should take a backseat to content. But he says his philosophy is, "It's better to under promise and over deliver. Apple is an example of good, straightforward, beautiful packaging. It's the autobiography of Steve Jobs. Target is a good example of bad packaging by over promising. Its marketing clearly stresses design to pull customers into its stores and yet, when you get there, the store design is like any big box store, disappointing customers. Starbucks overcharges for what it delivers." Silverstein adds, in the political arena, "Sarah Palin is like *USA Today*, easy on the eyes—no depth. If you put lipstick on a pit bull terrier, it's still a pit bull terrier." Designers have a reputation for playing to this shallowness, discouraged by clients (who wish to appeal to the lowest common denominator) from designing with nuance in mind, predisposed (and encouraged) to make everything fit into a neat, pretty package. Silverstein warns, "Good marketing can kill a bad product."

Look no further

Designers are often maddeningly self-referential. For the ones who see themselves as artists, it's a bitter pill to swallow to be told their design (as gorgeous and lyrical as it might be) may be wholly inappropriate. That, in order to be truly meaningful, the content has to come from the core of the client not just from your hand. That, in the drive to be authentic, it's essential for the designer to help the consumer make a distinction between substance and style—and, in the doing, encourage the consumer (or citizen) to choose substance. **CA**

Notes

1. *American Heritage Dictionary*.
2. Starbucks pays \$1.27 per pound for fair-trade coffee, one pound of that coffee sells for \$11.45, a 90% markup. A cappuccino may be marked up over 1,000%. Just as a simplistic comparison, designers' markup their expenses 10–25%; beyond which is considered egregious and unprofessional. Hourly rates may represent a markup in the range of 250–300% times salary.
3. Promoting physical addiction and grossly overcharging for products may be seen as immoral or sinful activities.
4. Discrimination, underpaying employees, not providing benefits to employees, while squeezing out mom and pop stores are just some of the myriad complaints against Wal-Mart that have resulted in a bad reputation and many class action lawsuits against the company.