

Playing with your drinks

the art of packaging beverages for children

Steve Osborne considers what might influence product appeal.

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Designing packaging for consumption by children is a tricky business, as Britvic recently discovered. All stocks of its Fruit Shoot brand had to be expensively recalled, when a new cap was identified as a potential choking hazard.

Of course the cap was designed to have the opposite effect, to offer children a new drinking experience and differentiate itself from copycat, brightly-coloured bottles with what is now a standard 'drink-through' cap.

Perhaps Fruit Shoot might have done better to invest in a branded character to increase its appeal, but in doing so it would have been joining a throng of mascots and film stars all vying for childrens' attention.

Before our recent work on several projects for kids brands, we were somewhat dazzled by the seemingly undifferentiated mass of smiling faces on nearly all children's packaging. So we set out to answer some simple questions: why do nearly all childrens packs feature characters? How do brands get the balance right between child appeal and parental approval? Do girls and boys want different things? Why do kids grow out of certain characters, and what can be done to keep their interest?

The first question has a fairly obvious answer: Characters make a pack more fun and encourage kids to play with the product. In an ideal world, playing includes actually eating or drinking it.

If this sounds like bribery then you're on the right track. Any parent who has fed a baby, pretending that each mouthful of food is a train going into a tunnel (this normally requires a bit of acting and repeating 'choo choo' in a loud voice), will recognise the problem: children don't always want to eat or drink what you'd like them to.



The use of characters

Characters can help get kids' attention and even their devotion for a while, but how do brands work out what kind of characters to use?

We've identified three basic strategies, which we call 'draw a face on it', 'back story for hire', and 'best of both worlds'. You can probably tell which one we like best.

Drawing a face on it is the entry level strategy for many brands, but few of these invest enough effort to deserve being called a brand. Kids can anthropomorphise practically anything – animals obviously, but also trains, trees, farm machinery and, thanks to the soft drinks and dairy industries, apples, strawberries and every other recognisable ingredient known to man.

But to stand out from the sea of smiling fruit you do need to invest in your characters. Use a top illustrator, better still an animator, and then make a movie, TV commercial, internet world, a game or all of the above. One of my favourite examples of well-crafted home-grown characters belongs to French soft drinks brand Oasis. These slightly weird fruit characters have bags more personality than a hundred Sally Strawberries, and star in some witty commercials that easily pass the nuance test.

What's the nuance test? Well I made the name up, but it's an important feature of any packaging that intends to appeal to children older than seven.

From this age children test out 'rebellion' behaviour to find their place in the world around them, they develop a keen interest in fantasy worlds and discovery, and they are highly influenced by TV, video games and by what their peers think is cool. They realise that the world is more complex than good or bad, right or wrong, and they start to enjoy nuance, or as Shrek would say: 'layers'.

This means that simple, one-dimensional characters become redundant overnight, and are now seen as very childish. Characters appealing to 7-10 year olds have more complex personalities, look and behave a bit more 'on the edge', but ultimately still play out the familiar storylines of challenge/obstacle/struggle/resolution.

But why bother to create a set of characters and invent exciting adventures for them when you can hire a complete world that's already known and loved by your target group? Welcome

to the world of 'back story for hire', in which well-known TV or film characters are simply licensed, to give products or brands instant child appeal.

This can be done by creating a special product range to fit with the license, as Gerber Juice company have recently done with the young kids' show *Lazy Town*; or (more usually), the licensed characters are simply bolted on to an existing brand as an endorsement.

The latter approach is very popular and in some ways the most 'lazy' of all, with big impact for very little effort. Simply follow the communication guideline provided by the licensor, and in particular note their number one rule: thou shalt not show our character doing anything that is 'out of character', such as actually consuming your brand.

Despite this limitation the arrangement works pretty well as long as you realise that it's not your brand being built here. A quick walk around the supermarket will show that *Shrek* and *Sponge Bob* 'like' quite a few other brands too.

A rather smart solution to this problem has been devised by Yoplait's P'tit Yop in the kids dairy drinks category, which we think is the best of both worlds. The brand has created its own 'bottle' character who introduces any new licensed offer with a short TV commercial. This means that the brand stays top of mind, and also gets a lot of credibility by association: you need to watch really closely to spot that he's not actually in the movie.

Getting into the lunchbox

We've seen why and how characters dominate the children's packaging landscape, but they are not the only way to get inside the lunchbox.

Children like to have signals of growing independence and mastery of their world, and even something as simple as 'my own way to drink' counts. This is part of the success of the drink-through cap mentioned above, though the humble straw remains an important feature for many brands.

Linked to a special format such as Capri-Sun's unique pouch, or the similarly-shaped Tetra



wedge, the ritual of popping the seal and slurping out the juice carries a lot of added value for children.

Finally, it's worth remembering why mums (and dads) want their children to engage with juices, smoothies, dairy drinks and water in the first place – hydration and nutrition for healthy growth.

In Japan functional brand Y Water opted to engage its young audience with collectable shaped bottles which interconnect to create unique shapes. The more bottles the children collect the more impressive the shape they can build.

They can even join a Y Water online community, competing for best design by posting their creation on the website.

This edutainment aspect links to a trend within children's drinks to offer more specific functional benefits than simply hydration or part of 5-a-day. The Wat Aah brand features a colour-coded wailing child linked to a selection of benefits including brain development.

Hip and cool for the trendy parents of precocious four year-olds perhaps, but possibly the last image that a self-respecting eight year-old wants to be seen with in the playground. When the next step is Coke and Red Bull, we parents expect the packaging for true children's drinks to help us delay that inevitable moment as long as possible. ■



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