

The virtual package

Steve Osborne of UK Design Agency Osborne Pike asks: 'As the retail to e-tail purchase shift gathers momentum, what are the real implications for brands and their packaging?'

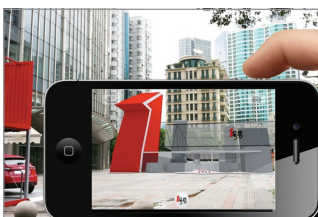
Ten years ago, if asked to name four companies that reflected progress and experience you would probably have said **Ford, GE or IBM**. In our new 'i for information' age, we are now more likely to opt for **Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon**, the digital Emperors of computing, search, social and shopping.

The ubiquitous tap and swipe interface of our smart devices changed the way we thought about gadgets, the big screen made previously fiddly activities enjoyable, and the rise of apps (1 million and counting) has enabled dozens of new experiences to be delivered by a single, portable, personal machine.

Buying products and services online may have come a long way. But until Smartphones (and tablets) became common only a few years ago, little really changed in terms of the shopping 'experience'. Now with almost exponential growth in smart devices, leading to sales passing the 2 billion mark within the next two years, there is truly going to be a transformation.

Using smart devices to browse not just the internet but real world objects is predicted to make the technology of Augmented Reality (AR) the next 'mass medium'. Like many mass media before it, its principal role will be to make buying stuff easier.

But whilst AR might be one channel that drives us to the point of purchase, that point will



ultimately be an online checkout or store. And it's the fact that we'll be going there more and more via our mobile devices that changes the game for retailing, branding and ultimately for packaging.

Think of the products that we're prepared to buy online, where we once missed the sensorial stimulus of physically interacting with them in stores. It was books, music and film and now clothes, groceries, even high value items such as jewellery and cars.

The supermarket model that fitted 1950's suburban America has been a highly successful one, because it places all the items we need under one big roof. Counters and aisles of great-looking products are presented raw or in attractive packaging, tempting us into buying what we want, on top of what we need. How can an online experience match that?

Since its beginnings some 10 years ago, online grocery shopping has come a long way but it still leaves a lot to be desired. Delivery times are more convenient and accurate, and there is less unwelcome substitution. But the experience of selecting the 50 or so items that constitute the average

weekly online shop is less engaging than actually going shopping. No car journey and trolley-pushing around a crowded store maybe, but also no real opportunities to browse for those unexpected delights that supermarkets are expert at confronting us with.

I believe this will change suddenly and dramatically in the near future, as consumers wake up and wonder why we've been acting like desperate housewives all these years. Technologies like AR will enable us to access virtual experiences of brands and products, at times and locations that suit us.

Real, tangible packaging will still need to perform and deliver in transit and in home – after all a virtual ready meal is not much use to anyone – but it will no longer need to double-up as the beacon of temptation on the supermarket shelf too. That job can be taken on by a delightful brand and product experience, delivered digitally at a virtual point of purchase.

The first motor cars were designed (and named) as 'horseless carriages'. Early virtual supermarkets, from Tesco's famous South Korean subway wall to China's Yihaodian



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augmented reality supermarkets in 'blank city spaces', have followed a similar pattern.

But whilst this is a way to ease reluctant humans into adopting new technology en masse, it will soon be replaced by a more efficient model.

The ability to 'add to basket' from brand and product avatars accessed from multiple digital sources will become the norm. As we witness this perfect storm of more intuitive search, rich augmented brand experience and ubiquitous purchase points, never before will the term 'brand image' have been more relevant. And now relieved of some of its 'silent salesman' duties, expect real, analog packaging to reinvent itself in surprising ways too. ■

