

# **What's the package deal?**

**The consumer's packaging experience**



A woman with blonde hair is smiling and pouring milk from a white box into a clear glass. The milk is captured mid-pour, creating a white stream. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# Boxing clever

Nifty new packaging can herald the arrival of an improved product, but our tendency to judge goods by their covers can also work against us

Words Wendy Knowler

**W**hat possessed consumer goods giant Unilever to spend millions radically redesigning the bottle of its Sunlight Dishwashing Liquid, an iconic South African product with almost 70 percent market share? Ethne Whitley, the company's home and personal care public affairs manager, says the company wanted to give consumers 'something fresh' in the 'boring' category of dishwashing liquid. It spent two years developing and thoroughly testing its new upside-down bottle with a fancy 'tottle', which dispensed a measured dose with every squeeze.

As it turned out, Unilever seriously overestimated consumers' need for excitement at the kitchen sink. They phoned the company in droves, complaining of leaking nozzles, not being able to control how much they used, air locks and more. Nine months down the line, Unilever scrapped the disastrous tottle bottle; the original nozzle – stuck on top of an ergonomically indented new bottle – began to return to the shelves late last year.

'We had to gracefully concede defeat... the consumers' vote counted and they wanted the old bottle back,' Whitley says.

Tiger Food Brands had better luck with its switch to an upside-down squeeze bottle for another South African favourite: All Gold Tomato Sauce. But it has kept its glass bottle on the shelf, which remains the bigger seller because it's far cheaper. 'Some consumers want the convenience of a squeeze bottle, and are willing to pay for it,' says All Gold brand manager Linda Thomas. The squeezer works like a charm, but only the have-lots, as the marketers call the nation's most affluent citizens, will pass up the glass. At my local supermarket, the 750ml glass bottle of All Gold Tomato Sauce was selling for R9,99 and the 500ml squeeze bottle for R10,99. That's 65 percent more expensive.

We don't always pay a lot more for greater user-friendliness, but generally, convenience costs.

Take onions. In supermarkets you can either pick them from a pile, pop them in a (free) plastic bag and stand in line for them to be weighed – or you can grab the ones in the handy net bag. So much less schlep, but quite a lot more expensive.

'Our increasing need for convenience, for products that suit our hectic, on-the-run lifestyles, is driving innovation in the global packaging industry. It's also driving up the cost of food.'

We no longer visit small grocery stores to have simple, unprocessed food put in paper bags by cheerful shop assistants. Most of us dash to the supermarket, where the shelves groan with artfully packaged items, from muffin mix to pasta sauce.

As the Packaging Council of South Africa puts it, the fact that women's 'primary place' is less focused on the home means she has less time for domestic chores and a greater need for 'labour-saving convenience products'.

We want to spend less time and effort not only preparing our food, but also getting it out of its packaging.

Even 'old-fashioned' souls who're willing to spend time cooking oats on a stove expect hassle-free packaging. Many Jungle Oats devotees were fed up with having to take a knife to a box of Jungle Oats to get it open. Some even resorted to sending Tiger

## CONSUMER AFFAIRS

Brands detailed suggestions on how the box could be more easily opened, complete with diagrams.

Finally, last year, Tiger Brands introduced a resealable pour spout to the lid, making it a bit easier for their customers to get their oats in the morning. That the old box could be upgraded without having to use new machinery meant that consumers weren't the poorer for the pourer.

'Over the years people asked us what could be simpler than perforating the box, but it was actually very complicated, given that the box is double-layered,' says Tiger Brands' breakfast category marketing manager Sonja Botha. 'But we got it right in the end, and many of our customers have written to us to express their appreciation.'

What the new box can't do is reseal – oats render any sticky bits useless. The appeal of reseal is, of course, that it saves us the schlep and cost of decanting or applying cling wrap.

Parmalat's resealable packs of cheese, the first of their kind in South Africa, are a classic example of this consumer-friendly trend and won the company a gold medal at the SA Gold Pack Awards in 2001.

But not all packaging innovations warrant the higher price.

Ultimately, convenience and cost are a trade-off. Are products in snazzy packaging really making your life easier, at considerable extra expense, or are you buying them simply because they are there and they look appealing?

Does a few minutes' saved labour really warrant the premium price for the diced butternut on the polystyrene tray, covered in cling wrap?



## WRAPPING RAGE

Remember those old cardboard fresh milk and fruit juice cartons we had to prise, cut or tear open – often spilling the contents in the process? The milk's now in screw-top plastic bottles. And pure fruit juice cartons and long-life milk are making the move towards very fancy snap-shut plastic seals rather than tear-off cartons.

But flour, sugar and maize meal packets are still very last millennium – few can claim to getting those paper things open without shedding some of the white stuff, and resealing is out of the question.

Ask the manufacturers why they don't improve the packs and they'll tell you that consumers will resist the inevitable price rise.

For the elderly, packaging is often a nightmare. In a national packaging survey conducted in the UK last year among 2 000 over-50s by Yours magazine, more than 90 percent of the respondents said packaging had become more difficult to open in the past decade, and no doubt their South African counterparts would agree.

Incredibly, 71 percent said they had hurt themselves while struggling to open packaging. Worst offenders: products with child-proof lids such as bleach; jam or pickle jars; pull-ring tins such as those that hold sardines; film-wrapped products; and sauce bottles.

In most cases it is the innovations – air locks in jar lids and child-proof, press-and-twist lids – that create problems for those who aren't fit and strong.





**RINSE BEFORE USE**

**RECIPE SUGGESTION**

These little stones are perfect for making a variety of jewelry. They are also perfect for making a variety of home decor items. They are also perfect for making a variety of children's toys.

**PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS**

- 1. Rinse the stones in warm water.
- 2. Dry the stones in a warm, dry place.
- 3. Use the stones as directed.

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OPEN



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Too often products use terms like 'easy open' on their packaging











# WORST PACKAGING OF 2022

