

Product design

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Telling the right story through packaging

by Steve Osborne

In episode one of a recent series of BBC films about 'The Foods that Make Billions', bottled water was presented as 'liquid gold', on account of the incredible amount of value added to this basic commodity by marketing.

The growth of this market, one which quadrupled in size globally between 1990 and 2005, seems all the more impressive when faced with the fact that the principal competition (tap water) is available virtually for free.

Whilst megatrends towards health and wellness and convenience have played a large part in this success, the real reason why bottled water sells is because it tells a great story.

As a life-giving, essential element of human existence, water has a pretty good story already; but in what one commentator described as the 'high point of global capitalism', the various brands of bottled water have embellished this message with their own unique nuances to create '20-30 varieties of something that almost by definition doesn't vary'.

The secret, as with all branding, is in the storytelling, and the history of the bottled water market is one of having the right story at the right time to (excuse the pun) tap into consumer motivations.

From **Perrier's** brilliant exploitation of the brand as a symbol of French sophistication, and **Evian's** story of pristine Alpine purity, to **Pure Life's** message of affordability for everyone,

water brands seem to have an inexhaustible supply of ways to appeal to consumer desires.

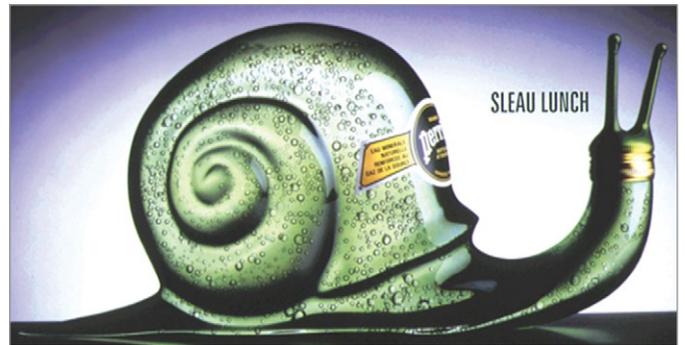
But how many stories can be told about bottled water? Which ones are spreading and growing the market? And how can a new brand hope to compete with the established players around the world?

To answer these questions look no further than the packaging designs on supermarket shelves. Packaging, after all, is the thing that people buy, hold, drink from and ultimately dispose of; a physical object where the brand story is literally in the consumer's hand.

Start with the bottle

It sounds obvious but it's very hard to create a powerful and unique story for your brand if it is sold in a bottle that looks and feels like everyone else's.

For packaged goods 'the packaging is the product', and the physical attributes of the pack (elegance, clarity, slimness etc) become transferred to the perception of the product, and the brand. The process is called 'sensation transference' and is one of the most powerful concepts in design. This principle is well



Perrier's symbol of French sophistication

understood by bottled water designers, who have created a plethora of different forms, each telling a brand story in 3-D.

How many stories?

In seeking to answer this question it quickly becomes evident that the category is split into two very different start points: not still and sparkling, but brands whose stories depend on the source, and those that don't.

Geology, geography and history

It's natural that 'source' is extremely important to many brands, since it is the reason behind their claims of purity, as well as any special properties or proportions of the trace ingredients that make mineral waters different at all.

The number one symbol by some distance is a mountain landscape, though clearly this is not going to be unique unless the mountains have their own sub-plot to enrich the story. Volcanic rocks (Volvic) and geothermal sources (Argentina's

Palau) provide an interesting and differentiating twist.

Source stories can also be told about countries or regions with a perception of pre-industrial, unspoiled charm.

Scotland's **Highland Spring** tells a story of 'organic land', whilst **Fiji** claims its water is 'rain that fell more than 450 years ago, which has been percolating ever since through layers of silica, basalt and sandstone'. **DMZ** is a brand from the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea, which for all the wrong reasons turns out to be one of the world's most unspoiled places. It may be true, but it isn't a great water story.

No stone is left unturned in the search for ever more esoteric locations to find 'the ultimate' water, including icebergs, glaciers, deep sea, the rainforest and, why not, rain. So far these are all niche stories and brands, but with some smart design and marketing, one of these could easily become the next **Fiji**.

Water sources can also add value through their historical and cultural importance. It's always



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Acqua Panna counts the Romans and the Tuscan Medici family amongst its past patrons

good if you can start a brand story with: 'Legend has it . . .', and in one such legend San Pellegrino's Acqua Panna counts the Romans and the Tuscan Medici family amongst its past patrons.

The packaging tells the brand's long and rich history through an ornate label which iconises the lion's head fountain from the Medici's Villa Panna. Sold as a fine table water to accompany food, the label transports you to a place where you can almost taste the focaccia!

Function gets emotional

The World Health Organisation gave the bottled water market a major boost when it made the world aware of the need to drink eight glasses or 1.5 litres of water each day, to replenish the body's lost fluids.

Whilst this fact does not favour any brand in particular (or even bottled water as a category), some brands have deliberately focused their story on this functional aspect of water.

The interesting thing about a functional water story is that

source becomes of marginal importance, since the purity and even the 'active' ingredients can be provided by technology.

No surprise perhaps, that **Coca-Cola** and **PepsiCo** both entered the US market with 'manufactured' waters, though the stories told by Dasani (restorative power) and Aquafina (all-American, non-elitist) were very different.

Perhaps the biggest success in the market's history comes from **Nestlé Waters' Pure Life**, which saw the opportunity very early on to manufacture water, locally, all over the world, and sell it at an affordable price in each market. As a result the brand has a dominant position in many of the emerging markets where growth is now highest, and its 'bottled water for all' story seems to outperform the traditional source stories.

China's leading brand **Wahaha** (until recently a joint venture with **Danone**) offers both source and manufactured products, but takes equal if not greater pride in the latter's technological achievements: 'Wahaha purified water takes the reverse-osmosis high-tech from the US, and the first-class facilities of the whole production line, including the production of bottles and caps, the filling and labelling, are all imported from foreign countries like France, Germany, Japan and Italy'.

From a design perspective the absence of a source does present some storytelling challenges, with the dominant solution an abstract



impression of hydrating blueness. Physical packaging also tends to be relatively generic, which whilst suiting the non-elitist story being told, does little for brand differentiation.

The new ethics of water

Perhaps the biggest challenges facing the market in the coming years are environmental and humanitarian.

Critics point to the irony of Western consumers having a large choice of bottled waters, transported from around the world, whilst a significant minority of the world's population has no access to safe, clean drinking water.

As ever brands have taken on these challenges by creating new business practices and telling new stories. Some new ethical brands have positioned themselves as 'aid agencies in a bottle', and have very powerful stories where 100% of profits fund projects to bring clean water to those who don't have it.

Some mainstream brands have adopted similar activities at a promotional campaign level, but

just as with CSR activities in the coffee and tea worlds, it can't be long before a major brand goes 'fully ethical'.

It's impossible to enter this world of doing good for people without having a similar commitment to the planet. This means that brand packaging needs to have its own supplementary story, which for most will be about recyclable or recycled PET, or even new plastics entirely. Earth water is all about funding African water projects, but its new plastic bottle also promises to be 100% biodegradable within five years.

Wrap-up

Whatever story a brand of bottled water tells, it is obvious from the examples we've seen that the chance of having this story noticed, and valued, depends to a large degree on the ability of its packaging design to tell that story really well.

We've focused on the primary packaging in this article, but multipack design has a large part to play too. Less the brand story in your hand but often its representative on the shelf, multipacking tends to mask the bottle shape, but does provide a bigger canvas to get the message across.

Despite the increasing complexity of the market dynamics, my advice is to keep your story simple and clear. Just like the water inside. ■

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