

A Silgan Plastics White Paper

# **9 key trends impacting plastic packaging container design**

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Brand owners are constantly challenged to create packages that simultaneously meet a long list of performance and marketing criteria. Packages must provide functionality, as well as aesthetic appeal. They have to address environmental issues, protect the products they contain and differentiate themselves on the store shelves.

With new demands continuously being placed on structural and graphic package design, we've compiled a list of current and emerging trends to consider before embarking on your next product launch or redesign project.

## **1. Sensory appeal**

Studies indicate that consumers engage multiple senses when making a purchasing decision. Since packages must be aesthetically appealing, the obvious sense that comes to mind is sight. Packaging has to visually speak to the intended demographic while colors and shapes need to support both the brand equity and its varieties.

However, sensory appeal goes beyond sight. Touch, or the tactile impression a package leaves behind, is also being used successfully as a marketing tool.

A recent example is Diamond Foods' Pop Secret® Premium Jumbo Popping Corn for stove-top or popcorn maker use. The surface texture of the 30-ounce PET container replicates that found on an ear of corn. Its unique design encourages consumers to pick it up and experience the "hand feel" of an ear of corn. Studies show that there is a high tendency for a product to end up in a shopping cart once it has been removed from the shelf.

Engaging the olfactory system is another way to trigger a consumer response. Scratch and sniff options have long been available for products such as perfumes, however, next-generation technology is moving toward the incorporation of scent into the packaging material itself. Consumers will be able to smell the contents without opening the container to do so.

Brand owners also have to be mindful of negative sensory stimulation. The recent introduction of Sun Chips® compostable bag received national attention. Although the company tried to market a structure which addressed environmental concerns, it wasn't counting on the consumer backlash it received for creating a package that was "too loud."

## **2. QR codes**

Quick Response (QR) codes are two-dimensional bar codes which lead consumers to additional information about the brand or package. QR codes are appearing on everything from store windows to direct mail pieces to packaging labels. Consumers can simply use an app loaded onto their smart phone to scan the QR code which leads them to an internet page or video containing more information.

Brand owners continually struggle with ways to communicate everything they want about the brand or product on a label panel that never seems to provide quite enough space. With the advent of QR codes, coupled with smart phone technology, marketers now have a new communications channel. The label panel can be expanded "virtually" to further engage consumers. Examples include providing more information about the product or brand, inviting participation in the brand's social community, couponing, supporting charities or causes and much more.

### **3. Maximizing the container ‘billboard’**

Delivering brand information to a consumer quickly, and in an aesthetically-pleasing manner, is usually the label’s responsibility. However, finding enough space to communicate all of the key elements has always been a challenge.

Sunscreen products are an excellent recent example. The new federally-mandated monograph requires more label space than the traditional SPF number. This means pushing container and label boundaries even further to accommodate mandatory legal and optional branding information.

It continues to be critical for package designers to take into account labeling limitations and technologies when designing the optimum package. Sometimes these objectives can be contradictory in nature.

For example, creating an oval bottle footprint expands the front and back facings. That design may not be attention grabbing, but it does provide an optimum surface for wrinkle-free labeling. Conversely, if you design a bottle with multiple geometries (angles, radii, etc.) you will create a more visually enticing package, but with a limited label area. An understanding of label materials and application technologies (shrink sleeves, pressure-sensitive, in-mold labels, etc.) is critical for making the right choices to maximize package impact.

New label technologies are on the horizon that will dramatically impact package “billboards” in numerous product categories. For example, new generation structures will be able to stretch and wrap around complex surface designs. This will allow brand owners to mate exotic structural elements with maximum billboard space.

### **4. Social purpose**

In the past decade, more and more brands have used their equity and consumer relationships to support various causes and charities. The package is oftentimes the instrument by which “cause support” is communicated.

A good example is breast cancer awareness. Whether it is pink ribbons on labels or pink tabs on metal can ends, brand owners have strongly signaled to their consumers that they support a cause that is mutually important.

We’ve seen color coding of closures, cut-outs on cereal box tops, and calls-to-action on social networking sites. Brand owners are becoming more socially responsible and they expect package designers to continue providing them with creative ways to communicate that participation.

### **5. Consumer safety**

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when Nicholas Appert introduced food in a sterilized metal can on a French battlefield, consumer safety has been a consideration in the design of every commercial package.

In addition to the obvious ones such as child resistant and tamper-evident devices, here are a few other package attributes that address consumer safety issues:

- Time/temperature monitoring devices
- No plug closure designs which prevent chemicals from spilling onto consumers
- Microwaveable container designs which allow venting to minimize contact with super-heated surfaces.
- Labels that change color to reflect temperature exposure
- Packages that facilitate correct dosing
- Counter intuitive, right-turn opening closures to minimize child access

The responsibility of both brand owners and package designers to deliver safety above all other attributes has been the one constant.

## **6. Concentrates**

Expect to see the concentrate trend continue. First gaining widespread application in laundry detergents and household chemicals, the objective was to remove water from formulations to reduce the container size. (A technique soup companies employed decades before.) The downstream benefits are astronomical: plastic resin reduction, container cube improvement, transport carbon footprint decrease, lighter weight, etc.

Some of these “first wave” concentrate formulations have given way to even greater liquid weight reductions. What used to require a brimming capful now usually only needs half the amount or less to perform the same function. We are also seeing more examples of either flexible pouches or smaller rigid containers used to deliver concentrated refills.

However, concentrates are not limited to household chemicals. New delivery systems and improvements in flavor formulations are taking “have it your way” to new levels.

For example, capitalizing on the single-serve water bottle market, Kraft Foods’ MiO product has created a new beverage category. The liquid water enhancing product enables individuals to “personalize” their water with flavor alternatives. The flavor concentrates are delivered in a uniquely-shaped blow-molded bottle with a flip-top closure. The package includes a non-drip silicone valve and a full-body shrink sleeve label.

We don’t see the trend toward concentrated formulations and custom delivery systems going away any time soon.

## **7. Iconic shapes**

The trend toward creating unique, sculptural shapes to support brand attributes, has been coming on strong, and we expect to see more of these in the coming decade. Whether it is curves to emulate waves for a sunscreen product or animal shapes for a children’s shampoo, brand owners are constantly trying to develop that new design which will someday end up in the “iconic” category alongside the Coca Cola bottle, the Campbell’s Soup can and others.

At the top of the wish list are shapes, colors and logo images that will “stick” with consumers. Creating a custom shape is usually the first step. Container designers are frequently asked to create that “wow” shape. The objective is to achieve category differentiation while also providing a long list of additional attributes.

Some tricks of the trade include:

- Taking elements of the logo and incorporating them into the structural design
- Supporting the logo with a complimentary container color
- Using bumps, ribs, embossing/debossing to communicate product attributes and logos

Sometimes container designers are asked to create line extensions for products already in a different package type. The new Truvia® PET jar is a great example. Originally available in individual packets held by a cube-shaped folding carton, the brand owner wanted to create a companion package for those who wanted to spoon the stevia-based sweetener out of a jar. The designers were directed to create a container that could be attractively displayed on the countertop. The green color palette and triangular graphic attributes were replicated on the closure and label, respectively. The container itself took on the crystalline geometries found in sugar molecules.

An example that took a trip into its packaging past was Finesse® shampoo. The brand owner wanted to create a modern take on the bottle’s original 1980s look. The retro redesign was important to re-engage the original generation of users and encourage them to introduce the brand to their children. The design of the shampoo line was done in tandem with the conditioner creating a family look both on store shelves and in the bathroom.

## **8. Private label**

The days of private label brands being housed in bland black and white packaging are in the distant past. Store brands are growing market share by using many of the marketing techniques employed by the leading national brands. Proprietary design and innovative packaging are driving this change.

When you walk into a major grocer or big box store today, you will immediately see the imprint of their private label in almost every aisle. Whether it’s Costco’s Kirkland label or Kroger’s Private Selection, each one has created a recognizable identity that ties it into the specific retail organization. Many even go to the effort of creating micro-sites (with recipes, videos, communities, etc.) that are dedicated to supporting store brands.

Specific package designs also help solidify consumer affinity. In fact, private label brands have been known to take greater design risks to create differentiation.

As we move through this decade, expect to see private label continuing to push design and structural boundaries in an effort to increase consumer appeal.

## 9. Environment

No current discussion on packaging trends would be complete without including the environment. Every packaging decision being made today takes environmental impact into account. This is particularly the case when new containers are being engineered. Factors that come into play include:

- Materials (post-consumer recycled, biopolymers, recycled content percentages, etc.)
- Structural modifications that minimize resin use
- Light weighting
- Cube improvement
- Shorter finishes/smaller closures
- Carbon footprint
- Transportation costs
- Package distribution logistics

Some brand owners also like to engineer packages for reuse. For example, empty jars that can be used for craft projects, pencil cups, jewelry, and other storage needs.

Currently, all eyes are on emerging biopolymers—particularly those that are plant based—to replace petrochemical alternatives. But, just like every other “environmental” decision, the commercial viability will be driven by the economic profile. Consumers, for the most part, have been clear about not wanting to pay more for products with an environmentally-positive profile.

The challenge the packaging industry will continue to face, in this decade and beyond, will be how to deliver packages that meet environmental objectives, in concert with desired performance and cost-effective economics.

### About Silgan Plastics Creative Design Services

If you would like to get more information on how Silgan Plastics can provide package design assistance, please contact us at (314) 469-4673 or [silgan\\_marketing@silganplastics.com](mailto:silgan_marketing@silganplastics.com).