

AN INSIGHT INTO THE IMPACT OF COLOUR AND PACKAGING WHEN PURCHASING A LOW INVOLVEMENT GOOD IN A CLUTTERED ENVIRONMENT

*Judy Rex and Stuart Wai, Faculty of Business and Enterprise, Swinburne University of Technology,
PO Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122, Australia, +61 3 9214 8055, jrex@swin.edu.au*

ABSTRACT

Research was conducted to determine the impact of colour and packaging as stimuli on the purchasing process for potato crisps, using in-depth interviews with a supermarket manager and a design agency director, and a survey of potato crisp consumers. The research showed that while the colour of the packaging did not consciously affect the purchasing decision, it was an important subconscious stimulus through the relationship that colour had with the most important stimulus of flavour. The colour of the package was used to differentiate the different flavours and brands, particularly in the cluttered environment that crisps are sold.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been conducted on the ways to influence consumers to make purchase decisions. The definition of a product or good includes attributes such as packaging, colour, price, quality, brand, the services and reputation of the seller [12] as well as the level of involvement in the purchase decision [13]. These factors act as stimuli on the decision-making process. Howard and Sheth [14] linked the processes of association with the decision-making process and the actual purchase, and they identified quality, price and distinctiveness as important stimuli that consumers use/associate when making a purchase decision. Danger [1, p. 3] believed that companies ‘must find ways to break through the bewildering clutter of products and messages stridently offered by competitors’ and that the colour of the package can have the ability to do so. This was supported by more recent research [2] [3], which illustrated that one of the ways that companies can accomplish this is through means such as colour associations, particularly on packaging. Packaging has been shown to be an important stimulus to the creation and communication of brand identity and in communicating brand meaning and strengthening the consumer-brand relationship, especially for low involvement consumer non-durable products [4]. This purpose has been largely attributed to the development of supermarkets with many manufacturers now relying on packaging to increase sales in the crowded, cluttered and competitive retail environment [5]. Though the package design is an integrated element of the promotional mix, it is also an important carrier of brand equity in the store [6]. However, according to Underwood [7, p. 209] there has been ‘little theoretical development in the area of packaging and its communicative effects’. Underwood, Klein and Burke [9] highlighted the importance of both colour and packaging as a brand communication vehicle. Garber, Burke and Jones [6] showed that the colour of the product’s package is an overlooked tool that marketers can use to gain the consumer’s attention. While some colours have the ability to make goods stand out from their competitors among the clutter of the goods and promotional material at the point of purchase [2] [3] other colours do not have this effect [3]. Grossman and Wisenblit [10] suggested that the concept of associative learning could assist in explaining consumers’ behaviour in relation to their responses to the colours of a product as consumers make connections between products and events that take place in the environment. Consumers may develop preferred colours for particular goods due to learning through association [10].

Research was needed to gain an insight into the effects of colour and packaging as stimuli at the point of purchase in a cluttered environment for a low involvement product. In deciding on the product to be researched, it was decided that potato crisps were suitable, because there were several well-known brands competing in the Australian market; potato crisps are non-durable fast moving consumer goods; the manufacturers use different colours to distinguish the different flavours, eg. Pink/ purple for salt and vinegar; and, potato crisps are part of the competitive Australian snack food industry which has an annual turnover of \$AUD4, 128 million with potato crisps making up 19% of the value of the industry [11]. The research design involved depth interviews with a director of a design agency and a supermarket store manager, and a survey of 151 student consumers who had bought crisps in the last month.

FINDINGS

When deciding which packet of potato crisps to purchase the quality, the brand and the price of the product were the most important factors. The brand was the most important attribute for the manager, followed by the quality and price. He also believed that the quality and price of the product influenced the consumers' choice. 'Quality goes without saying... if you haven't got quality don't even consider putting a product on the shelf. The other thing is price'. The consumers said that flavour was easily the important stimulus when purchasing potato crisps. Using a constant sum scale (out of 100) to rate the six attributes of flavour, quality, brand, price, size and shape, and the colour of the packaging, the consumers indicated that the flavour of the product was easily the most important stimulus with an average rating of 38 points. This was about twice as important as the quality (21 points), which was more important than the brand (14 points) and the price (13 points), ahead of the size and shape of the crisps (8 points) and the colour of the packaging (7 points). It was interesting that the consumers and manager did not consciously consider the colour of the product's packaging to be a stimulus while making a purchase decision. In understanding if an association existed between the colour and packaging of potato crisps, the manager compared the packaging of the branded crisps to the neutral colours used by generic brands and mentioned that the colour can affect the price and sales of a product. 'Colour definitely influences customer purchases... Over the past five years the cheaper generics with poor quality have been replaced with better coloured (packaging), better quality and they are still cheaper. That is why they now have 15% of market share.. (instead of) a 7% or 8% market share'. The director believed that the colour of packaging has grown in importance as a stimulus in the decision-making process and that it has become as important as other visual elements of the package, such as the style of the font and the print. The consumers had a similar view, as they relied strongly on the colour of the packaging when trying to identify a particular flavour of potato crisps. When asked to rate the importance of the colour of the packaging to identify flavour, about three quarters (72%) of the consumers believed that the colour of the package was very or fairly important to them. The colour was more important for flavour recognition than brand recognition, as when the consumers were asked to rate the importance of the packaging colours when trying to identify a brand of potato crisps about half of the consumers (52%) said that the colour of the packaging was very or fairly important. The consumers clearly associated different colours with different flavours. Approximately two thirds of consumers (63%) associated the colours purple/pink with the flavour salt and vinegar, and about two thirds (60%) associated blue with the plain flavour of potato crisps.

When asked to comment on how competitors differentiated themselves at the point of purchase, both the manager and the director indicated that packaging, marketing and pricing were the key differentiating factors. The manager and the director considered that colour was the major component of the packaging and the director commented that the colour of the packaging could assist the product to break through

the 'clutter' at the point of purchase. To further understand this notion of clutter at the point of purchase, the consumers were asked to indicate how cluttered the shelves or racks displaying the potato crisps looked, using a 1-10 scale. On average the respondents reported a medium level of clutter of products at the point of purchase during their last purchase of potato crisps, as the majority of the sample rated the clutter between 5 and 10 out of 10. Further analysis of this research question focused on the 34% of respondents who experienced 'high' levels of clutter (levels 7-10) when purchasing potato crisps. Not surprisingly, with flavour being the most important stimulus to purchase crisps, colour was rated more highly by these consumers as being important in identifying the flavour of crisps in a cluttered environment, than the brand. The majority of those who reported high levels of clutter at the point of purchase believed that the colour of the packaging was very or fairly important when identifying a particular flavour (69%) and more than half believed this in regards to identifying the brand (51%).

In conclusion, it seems that when purchasing a low involvement product such as potato crisps with its proliferation of different brands and flavours and the seemingly cluttered environment in which they are sold, the importance of product differentiation based on coloured packaging to attract purchase was of vital importance. The findings showed that the colour of the packaging did have the ability to assist the potato crisps to stand out from the clutter at the point of purchase, and that consumers had strong associations between the different colours and flavours of crisps. The importance of the colour of packaging as a stimulus in the consumer decision-making process was not recognised as a conscious stimulus by the consumers, the design director or the manager. However, as a relationship existed between the colour of the packaging and the flavour and brand, this assists in demonstrating that colour was an important stimulus, albeit a seemingly unconscious one, for consumers in the decision-making process.

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