

Colour as a Code in Food Packaging: an Argentine Case

¹Maria Luisa Musso
mlmcolor@arnet.com.ar

¹Facultad de Arquitectura,
Diseño y Urbanismo,
Universidad de Buenos Aires

ABSTRACT

Intellectual and emotional aspects of the product's image raise the concerns about its qualities; concerns about nutrient content, the ingredients, the amount of sugar, salt, fat. The product appearance induces expectations.

"Expectations govern our attitude to food and the food scene. We deduce from the appearance of the food in front of us whether it will harm us or be good for us", says John Hutchings.(Hutchings 2003)

The consumer searches for the attributes he considers most suitable according to his internal needs, in the products he wants to buy. It is necessary to define a target segment to propose the product that is effectively closer to the ideal of the buyer and to communicate its benefits.

This is why the packaging has a big responsibility. Emotions, memory, social patterns, are behavioral areas in which colour plays an important part. There is a message to remember, and the packaging is a message in itself; it helps to guide, motivate and encourage consumers in their purchase decision. It is imperative to choose the potential customer for the message; each target has its language, its expectations.

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1. SEGMENTATION

It is significant to consider two types of segmentation: functional segmentation and psychological one. In the functional segmentation the idea is to group consumers according to the functional advantages the consumer is looking for. When products are addressed to health conscious consumers, the packaging, associated to the product concept, can produce a functional segmentation. Packaging has a decisive influence on the consumers perception, and therefore, in the purchasing decision.

Psychological segmentation is based on the characteristics of the consumer's social class, their lifestyle, reference models, their personality, involved in the emotional satisfaction they obtain in the purchase. The psychological differential advantages are often more sustainable than the functional. Packaging must show specific signs, build confidence as much as unambiguous product identity.

2. CHANGES IN CONSUMER

Consumers, increasingly informed and demanding, have taken the lead. They show new desires, seeking harmony between quality and wellness. In the twenty-first century the will to live in a more human and less frivolous world emerged. Banality is being outdated. The importance of healthy living, honesty and revaluation of emotions are values that flourished and increasingly permeate many aspects of life. Packaging design is one of them. Information and consciousness: accompanying the suitable healthier urban living, many products are incorporating functional values as a vital part of their communication systems. Nutritional and functional information are relevant when choosing a brand or a particular variety.

3. VISUAL IDENTIFICATION

Colours are created in our brain as a perceptual tool to facilitate our visual-cognitive and visual-emotional functions. Colours are more than a physical process: they work as a signs system, a source of information decoding the world around us. In this world, the products we buy every day are present. The consumers develop their opinion about the products they see in less than 90 seconds from their first interaction with them. Between 62% and 90% of that assessment is based on the colour of the product. (Institute for Color Research, Color Communications, Inc)

The communicative properties of a color can be defined by two categories: natural associations and psychological or cultural associations.

Research conducted by the secretariat of the Seoul International Color Expo 2004 documented

the following relationships between color and marketing: 92.6 percent said that they put most importance on visual factors when purchasing products. Only 5.6 percent said that the physical feel via the sense of touch was most important. Hearing and smell each drew 0.9 percent.

Vision is the primary source for all our experiences. Current marketing research has reported that approximately 80% of what we assimilate through the senses, is visual. Color addresses one of our basic neurological needs for stimulation.

A complex semiotic process enables the understanding of products differentiation on the market. The impact of colour on the decisions about what product to buy is due to the fact that it is a symbol that reflects the image we have of ourselves, our personality.

4. THE COLOUR OF THE PRODUCT

Colour is an essential element used as a sign to represent desirable product attributes. Consumers respond to the "total product" that also includes their image. Successful design requires an awareness of how colors communicate meaning. Colour can provide information about the quality of a product and can also show a strong association with certain product categories. Green, for instance, is associated with natural products (Figure 1).

The marketing function of the package includes the location, because the consumer must be able to identify the type of product (dairy desserts, breakfast cereals, detergents, etc.) from a distance in the linear, and also identification, because once located the product the consumer must clearly identify the products they really want to buy within a family or brand. The packaging must show specific signs, the information that helps build confidence in the product and strengthens consumer purchasing decisions.

The graphics and colours used in the package must be consistent with the status or image or expectations it wants to satisfy and must serve to identify and locate the product. Colour improves readership. Colour can be used as a referent code system for the product. Colour coding helps to clearly identify the desire product.

In package design some actions apply to the expected typology change in order to produce a strong identification with the brand (Figure 4). We also find the opposite strategy, which is to favor the association with the category identity. Breaking the category code can be a key to differentiate a new product. In spite of the fact that some brands traditionally use green as a strong (Figure 2) identifier, green colour is used in associations with the green countryside and healthy products in most countries.

Green is related to nature, freshness, fertility, peace, hope, humidity, regeneration, growth, relaxation; is calming, curative, and balsamic, in its positive meanings.

In many countries is used to identify bio products. In some others, green is also a visual attribute related to low fat; so do pink and light blue (Figure 6 and 7).

5. DIET OR LIGHT PRODUCTS

Important changes in consumption values caused a typological substitution in the colours expected for certain products. The irruption of diet and light products and the explosive growth in value reached by the concept "*low calorie*" produced an unexpected change in the colour paradigm.

The first experiences in colour for diet products focused on white, silver and pastel colours as pink. Finally, green, associated with nature, became a strong identifier for this type of products. Then, colour is not talking about product attributes but on their feature of being "*light*" instead.

Colours meaning can also have a regional value, given by a mixture of cultural interpretations associated with some colours and their historical use.

In Spain, for instance, light products began to appear in the 80's proposed as healthy products. Begoña Hernández Salueña, from the Department of Physics of the Public University of Navarra, after consulting several dairy companies, says that there is no official code for the colours of the milk pack.

The use of colour by type of milk (blue for the whole, green for semi-skimmed and skimmed) has to do with the organization in supermarket shelves and with the communication for consumers. These colours appear having being selected by the first brand that sold these products, followed for the other brands. But several brands have recently decided to break that tradition and begun using colours more for identifying the brand than the (Figure 3) category. Central Dairy Asturiana, for example, has decided to use red for whole milk instead of blue and blue for the semi-skimmed and green for the skimmed. Pascual, uses dark blue for whole milk; light blue and pink for semi-skimmed and skimmed.

6. LIGHT PRODUCTS IN ARGENTINA

It is interesting to see how in Argentina, green colour has definitely been adopted as a category code, especially in dairy products. The low fat dairy products area at the supermarket is easily recognizable from far away in a green spot.

Gonzalo Petracchi, packaging designer for

Sancor, says: The green code emerged in the argentine market around the 90s, when the changes from diet products to light ones came out in order to clarify what was being offered to consumers.

Diet products sought a cleaner and pure image, in association with reduced-calorie diets choosing a colour as blue/cyan. At the beginning of the change, diet and light were virtually synonymous, but light category products wanted to find their own individuality in a codified meaning, an identity charged with emotional values as care and health, without giving up flavor (Figure 8).

The official argentine food code and that one of Mercosur include the requirements for food labeling, in order to give the information that builds confidence, but no rule appears mentioning the use of colour as an identifier.

In argentine food code, for instance, food labeling included in chapter XVII-food or dietary regime-specifies the words to use, but not colour: Food with low lipid content will be labelled with the name of the product and the indication "*diet, reduced lipid value*" or "*diet of low fat*" and also may bear the legends "*reduced calorie or low calorie*".

In spite of in most cases the colour code for whole fat products is blue, red is also used in Argentina as in other countries.

Green is definitively the colour code for low fat and fat free in Argentina. Some brands are recently incorporated two greens, light green and darker one; to show a different identification for no fat and low fat.

There are a few exceptions. Nestle use light blue for 0% fat powder milk and Sancor have introduced recently pink to identify 0% fat milk.

Green is the colour of security. It is also the colour of permission

Green packaging assures us to eat healthy, preventing us from getting fat, with safety, confidence and certainty. Big companies of massive consumer products invested heavily in communication to encourage the establishing of an expressive symbolic code. In the last two years, in Argentina, this code has widely spread to others categories. (9)

Celebrating the power of colour as a code in food packaging, I would like to remember what Charles Riley wrote in his book Color Codes:

"completely mastering color is impossible, but the power it imparts to those who dare to handle it is as profound as that of light itself".

He says also

"colour is a third Promethean gift, like language and fire". (Riley, 1995)



Figure 1 - Green = Natural
Figure 2 - Green as brand identifier



Figure 3 - Spain Red-Blue=Whole/
Blue-Pink= Light
Figure 4 - USA Red=Whole=Fat
Free=Low Fat



Figure 5 - Germany Green=Whole/
Red=Low
Figure 6 - Italy Blue=Whole
Pink=Whole Pink=Low Green=Low



Figure 7 - Chile Blue=Whole/
White+Blue-Blue-Green=Low Fat
Figure 8 - Argentina Red=Whole
Green=Low/ Blue=Whole
Green=Low



Figure 9 - Argentina- Others
categories using Green as light=Low
fat



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