

PACKAGING

The *package* likely derives its name from combining the ideas of *packing* and *baggage*. Something is put inside and then travels somewhere. Simple parcels, bundles, and bulk shipping containers of unassuming design retain a functional adherence to their name. Call me old-fashioned, but I think a package dedicated to its contents is more than sufficient. I like the plain, little, waxed cardboard fold-up cartons with wire handles and occasional leakage at no extra charge that transport the take-out variety of American Chinese cuisine home from the restaurant. I like the exemplary one-gallon plastic milk jug that admittedly takes advantage of advanced materials, boasts a modern molded-in handle design, and may sport a bar-code sticker on its bottom, but still unobtrusively cleaves to a true package's definition. If packages were to be sworn in before deployment, I think their oath would read something like, "We pledge to preserve, protect, defend, and explain our contents, through inclement weather, abuse in transit, heat, cold, dust, and age on the shelf, with every fiber of our taped seams, folded flaps, and corrugated bodies, until we are consigned to our great recycler in the sky."

Packages have come a long way from plain brown butcher paper and burlap sacks. Ingenuity, if not necessity, has made great strides consistent with this oath. Packages now are better tailored to their specific contents and better engineered to defend against the elements and against the shocks of the invariable plummet from great (tailgate) heights. They also now provide us with more than the hand-scrawled name of what's inside. We get dietary information; insight into size, style, and materials of fabrication; the name of the manufacturer; preparation instructions; warnings of near- and long-term hazards; and the helpful explanation of excess air, "the contents may have settled during shipment." When particularly lucky, we even get instructions on how to open the package that actually work without superhuman strength or power tools. This is all progress. Vestiges of the old ethic survive.

Packages have also come a long way in a less thrilling vein. Great liberties

have been taken interpreting their basic oath. Objects, and even concepts, masquerading as packages have arrived. The typical *nouveau* package is less full of its contents than it is of itself.* Such inverted priorities rely on credible clichés like, "clothes make the man" and "beauty is only skin deep." Come to think of it, our clothes and even our skin would fall nicely under today's liberal definition of packaging.

Formerly drab containers are now littered with advertisements, contests, unrelated coupons, endorsements by superstars, and a slew of reasons to save their box tops. Most embellishments would flunk a relevance test.

We would also complain vehemently about embedded subliminal messages, but we haven't noticed any. Did we mention the exaggerated claims of newness, bigness, freshness, and cost effectiveness? Adjectival inflation has rendered "king size" the smallest size one can buy (no offense intended to any monarchs in the audience). Why, the prose and art on today's shelves, put there only to appropriate our business, are worthy of their own Pulitzer categories. What would *you* do if you were selling something identical to your competitor's product? Go for differentiation in packaging, of course! There is more than one way to sell a corn flake or a pet rock.

The primary job of *nouveau* packaging, therefore, is to appeal to the prospective customer, oath or no oath. This revised mission disconnects packaging *per se* from its implied physical chore. It becomes noncorporeal and abstract in many applications. To wit, a few more clichés seem to apply like, "the medium is the message," "form is function," and "mutually assured destruction," the last containment gambit having lost its appeal since the end of the Cold War. Having gone abstract, we are now at liberty to confuse our package as *container*, with a formerly distinct usage, package as *combiner* of related elements that may then be treated as a whole.

We are not leveling a bad wrap at all these *faux* packages. A benefits package attracts new employees and delivers the goods. A frescoed mausoleum, hardly *nouveau* if ancient pyramids are includ-

ed, confers real solace on survivors. Electronic packages have made everything but thinking easier. A legislative package seems the only way to move a bill into law. A grant-proposal package is our bread and butter. And, both the bread and butter and *nouvelle cuisine* actually taste better in a well-presented gastronomic package.

However, in the midst of the U.S. presidential election campaign, it is hard not to notice how all manner of elements including political issues, spin doctors, train and bus rides, hair styling, sound bites, TV ads, testimony from third grade teachers, and the contestants themselves are woven into an appealing image, in essence packaging the candidates for our consumption as if they were movie stars. These ephemeral packages have the advantage that, in true chameleon fashion, they change to suit the demographics of the customer of the moment. Hard truths bundled with panacean promises are much more palatable. Analogies to adaptive optics or photochromic materials (rose-colored, of course) somehow don't do justice to this phenomenon.

We are therefore looking for a defense against packaging hyperbole with no redeeming social or ergonomic value and against Trojan-horses, wolves in sheep's clothing, and super patriots wrapped in their own flags. Materials research has already made great strides for the palpable package. Now researchers must develop advanced packaging materials (*faux* or otherwise) with extraordinary adaptive optical properties. With the sensitivity of a Pinocchio nose and concomitant embarrassing consequences, our miracle materials must detect any disingenuous contents or deceptive orchestration of elements and induce instant self-transparency. Then, what you see is what you get. A grant proposal for research leading to this breakthrough will be forthcoming as soon as we package it properly.

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*An excellent little essay by Charles Daney on the cyberspace aspect of this phenomenon can be found at <http://www.best.com/~cgd/home/plain.htm>.