

A Packaging Boom

Baby boomers continue to influence the food industry, from product trends to packaging

Boomers are constantly in the news these days, as part of demographic studies, trend analysis and forecasting. The sheer size of the boomer group means that they continue to be a major driving force not only behind food and beverage products, but also in the design of packaging containing those products.

Boomers themselves, of course, are not a homogenous group. If you define baby boomers as having been born between 1947 and 1966, there are still huge differences between those from the beginning, middle and end of that range. "I'm right at the front end, a child of the '60s," says Gary Fread, president and CEO of the Guelph Food Technology Centre in Guelph, Ont. "What grabs my attention will not be the same as what appeals to boomers who came 10 or 12 years after me. However as a group, we have extraordinary purchasing power, and are a major driver of what appears and survives in the market."

So what are the attributes boomers tend to look for? "Well, we're certainly not looking for anything that depicts us as old," says Fread. "On average, boomers think of themselves as being 12-to-15 years younger than their actual age, and they want products that support their health while still indulging their enjoyment of the good things in life."

So what value does packaging add to products aimed toward boomers?

PORTABILITY

Boomers' lives are more active than ever before. And despite the multi-tasking and juggling of numerous commitments, they're largely thriving on it. As far as North America is concerned, if it doesn't fit in a car cup holder, it just won't fly. "The new Volvo XC90 has 18 cup holders," says Dana McCauley, concept architect with Richmond Hill, Ont.-based Dana McCauley & Associates Ltd. "But dashboard dining, while a growing phenomenon in North America, is not a factor elsewhere, like France, where dining is an event not an on-the-go refuelling session." In North America, cup holder-friendly packaging has an advantage. It must also be recloseable or resealable, and not leak while grandma cheats death on her mountain bike or races down a double-diamond ski run.

ACCESSIBILITY

Related to portability, accessibility is essential for all consumers, but particularly to those whose hands are weaker

than they once were, or who are succumbing to arthritis. Packaging that meets this need includes caps that are easier to remove and replace, such as twist-off caps on gable paper-board cartons of milk and fruit juice.

LEGIBILITY

While boomers do not intend to go gently into that good night, most are realistic about failing eyesight. "Larger, clear print is essential, especially if you want to highlight those health and nutrient claims that differentiate your product," says Tom Pugh, Marketing director of Danone Canada. "But this can be a challenge on a small package, such as our pots of Activia and Cardivia yogurt. To overcome this, we've put the detailed information on the outer wrapper, in large enough text to be easily legible and attractive." This bundling can also greatly benefit retailers by increasing the "dollars per ring" in each transaction.

Retailers are also embracing the challenge. "Some retailers provide magnifying glasses attached to store shelves to enable customers to read the smaller print," says Aynsley Deluce, director of Strategy and Research at Watt International. "And Target's in-store pharmacies use redesigned pill-bottles with interchangeable, colour-coded rings to help customers identify which medication is which and whose is whose."

SUSTAINABILITY

A growing concern among boomers is the environmental sustainability of the packaging that protects their products. "Boomers notice over-packaging and non-recyclability," says Fread. "The packaging designer who finds a way to balance convenience and environmental responsibility will really be a winner."

Of course, it's also important to remember that while the practical functioning of packaging gains in importance as the population ages, it doesn't render the aesthetic and marketing aspects moot. Representing a highly educated consumer group that is more inclined than other consumers to be actively engaged in their product selections, boomers can present a real opportunity for food marketers, as long as we in the industry remember to consider the total package.

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