

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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PAINT IT BLACK (OR, THE POWER OF RESISTING THE USUAL)

On a recent trip to Thailand, a smoker-Thai friend of ours was talking about a new line extension from Marlboro, available within Asia only in Japan. It seems someone had brought him a carton of these new cigarettes, called Marlboro One, from Tokyo on a recent visit and, while their medium-mild menthol flavor was nothing all that special, the packaging was. The famous Marlboro flip-top box for this new flavor was colored **black**. Our Thai friend explained further that, although he had long since smoked all the Marlboro One cigarettes, he continued to use one of the black flip-top boxes...by merely placing ordinary Marlboro Menthol cigarettes in the black box. For what reason, we asked? His reply: young Thai women find the black box cool and unusual, making the carrier of the box also, well, at least a little cool and unusual.

At first thought, the notion of packaging any cigarette in a black box would seem to be counter-intuitive, counter-category, really. After all, isn't black the color of death? And for sure, given the way many cigarette brands are currently packaged in Asian countries—with ghastly photos of real smokers' ravaged lips, mouths, lungs and the like pasted on the front panel—the last thing a cigarette brand needs is yet another reminder of the harmful effects of smoking. On the other hand, knowing how many smokers *perceive* carrying a popular brand around with them to be a statement of their own image, maybe finding a most unusual, even sleek, packaging design is actually a smart marketing move. Clearly, for our Thai friend, this image-perception has some value.

But this incident, this real human behavior surrounding an unusual packaging design, got us to thinking about some similar packaging moves in other categories. Perhaps you will think of some to add to our list, but here's our short-list of some notable "paint-it-black" packaging initiatives that appear to have been successful:

1. **The Reach Toothbrush**—Although it is perhaps not readily recalled today, when the Reach Toothbrush was introduced around 1978 here in the United States it was the first and only brush that was designed like a real dental instrument—with an angled neck, bi-level bristles, and a compact head (all with the intention of *reaching* back teeth and cleaning them better than traditional flat toothbrushes). The original Reach Toothbrush was also the first and only toothbrush with a black box package—using a color that was no doubt just as counter-category at the time as black is today within the cigarette

category. Why black? Well, it was a carefully and consciously thought-out strategic marketing move—not simply a merchandising move, which with a block of black definitely popped out from the usual sea of blue and white that comprised the toothbrush sections in drug and grocery stores at the time.

For one thing, the black box made for a perfect background against which to lay a photo illustration of the revolutionary brush design; consumers who perhaps had not see the brush on television could instantly see the first-of-a-kind architecture of the brush. For another, it was in packaging what the brush was in design: an obviously contemporary look. You could well say that the black package design fit the brand’s positioning perfectly. The story goes that some senior executives within Johnson & Johnson were nervous about a toothbrush package that so deviated from the “usual” look of the category...but resistance to the usual prevailed and, within the first bi-monthly share data, Reach was America’s number 2 toothbrush, with double-digit out-of-stocks.

2. **Minute Maid Orange Juice**—It’s not clear to us when the Minute Maid Brand launched its unheard of black packaging in the OJ category; it may have pre-dated the Reach launch. But whenever it happened, it was also a virtual “crazy” move: orange juice packaging was required to reflect the brilliance of the sun and the radiance of Mother Nature’s contribution to the fresh-picked oranges inside, right? It may be that Minute Maid marketers were mainly interested in the stopping power of “black block” within the dairy case (also, at the time, typically a sea of white). But this packaging withstood the test of time, and only within recent years has the brand moved to a more “natural” or categoric look—with some remnants of the original black, of course.
3. **The Original iPhone**—In our memories there is perhaps no cooler-looking introductory box than the one the iPhone launched with. As with the Reach Toothbrush, the black background allowed for a striking graphic contrast to the device’s silver outline and multi-colored apps. But did you ever hold one of these boxes in your hand? If so, you would covet the box almost as much as what was inside; never have we seen such a seamlessly tight box architecture—both between the top and bottom of the box itself, and within the incredibly small space inside. Again, iPhone marketers surely intended that the ultra-cool design of the box would live up to that of the phone itself. As far as we know, there had never been a mobile phone packaged with such an unusual architectural and graphic design.
4. **U by Kotex**—If you aren’t a sanitary protection user or marketer, you may have missed this, most recent paint-it-black move. In any event, you owe it to yourself to visit their website. This relatively new sub-brand has not only resisted the usual in its counter-category black packaging but also in its unheard of brightly and multi-colored sanitary pads. It’s clear from just the website’s homepage that the brand is all about changing the san-pro conversation with teens and young women. For example, the first column-click on that homepage invites consumers to “challenge the norm” (another way of stating, “resist the usual”). As for the TV ads, well, they are breaking every rule in san-pro advertising...and, there is perhaps no category that has been so mired in usual rules for

advertising as san-pro has been (you've seen the flapping wings and blue dye a few thousand times, haven't you?).

So what's the moral of this short-list story? Get a black package as fast as you can? Hardly. Black packaging is simply an emblem of the moral: namely, in the sea of marketplace sameness, it is more powerful than ever for a brand to resist the usual in the major marketing mix elements we all employ.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS—Ways to Resist the Usual

1. Set up a full brand-building team session in which the team identifies all the ways the brand is currently, pretty much following the expected category moves: product design, packaging, merchandising, communications, promotion, digital and so on. As much as possible, gather copies of images of your brand's actions and those of others in the category; put them up on a wall and assess what you see: is what your brand does able to stand out from the crowd? Or is it part of the "wallpaper"?
2. Canvass other categories for marketing moves that are counter-category, that really do resist the usual. Try to infer what their marketers were thinking as they implemented unusual moves.
3. Set up a smaller action-oriented brand team with the aim of brainstorming moves your brand might make; push the boundaries way out. And be sure to include overlooked things such as *resource-hiring*. A client of ours in the medical field had always used a medical advertising agency; they found themselves up against 4 other strong competitors, all with "class-effect" benefits, yet they desperately wanted to break out from that class-effect and grow beyond their "fair share." What helped them break out the most was resisting the usual by hiring a *consumer* communications agency.

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