

# Does the Package Really Sell? – Pilotage Study

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**Abstract:** Packaging is a significant marketing tool. It plays a vital role in product strategy, but also remains a tool for brand communication with a consumer. Effective packaging should encourage to buy the product, but whether consumers actually pay attention to them?

The article presents the results of author's own research (ethnography) on young consumers (18-26 years) living in Lublin (Eastern Poland) completed in July 2016. In the study, the process of food products purchasing was followed and carried out in the usual manner by a participant (in a shop chosen by him/her) and then approximately a 40-minute interview about his/her shopping habits was conducted.

The study showed a number of factors that limits the promotional function of a single unit product package. These include: shopping routine, some shopping habits, the specificity of commercial space in a store and an increase of consumer awareness.

**Key words:** ethnography, purchase decision making process, young customers, unit package

**JEL codes:** M31, M37, D12

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing sales in the food market becomes more and more difficult for companies. On the food market, which is the largest retail market in Poland, there is a growing deflation on food prices, strong competition and growing consolidation of the market (PMR, 2015; KPMG, 2015: 9-32). Consumers (especially in Poland) are very sensitive to the price promotion (Procontent Communication, 2016), and they are not loyal consumers (Siemieniako, 2010: 2-3), although some

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research, e.g., Salesforce (2016) can give a different impression. However, it appears that there is omitted loyalty routine, which cannot be understood in the same way as conscious loyalty. Price sensitivity and low loyalty can be caused by both consumers low-income and the fact that in the urban areas often walk they can take advantage of the several shop's offer within a 10-15 minute. Moreover, consumers are still informed about promotions by various media (store leaflets, television advertising and internet advertising). A smart consumer can choose from each offer the most cost-effective products without putting a great effort or time into this activity. Therefore brands need other tools that facilitate catching consumer's attention but simultaneously does not raise so many negative emotions, like e.g. advertising (Bandera-Sikorska, no date). Such an instrument could be, therefore, the product packaging, which in literature is often described as the "silent salesman".

Product packaging are a very important issue for an enterprise, because it affects so many areas of its business, particularly in the food market. Good packaging must not only protect a product, but also allow for efficient logistics and distribution, reconciling the needs of both suppliers and employees of shops (allowing them to easily exhibit goods), to prevent against losses throughout the supply chain, meet the legalities (including protection against imitation), not to harm the environment, but also allow consumers to easily use a product. The packaging should also allow for a proper positioning of the brand, stand out from competition and encourage to a purchase. Furthermore, it should correspond with consumer needs, respond to socio-economic changes and be cost-effective. Fulfilling all of these criteria can be a great challenge for the company.

## **2. The impact of packaging on purchasing decisions**

Studies show that packaging is one of the most important and influential factor that affect consumer decisions (Rizwan et. al., 2014: 125). According to the Model of Packaging Communications, packaging can stimulate consumer behaviour by:

1. non-verbal elements: quality, colour, graphics, shape, size, due to more innovative printing techniques - texture and packing material with which it was made of;
2. and verbal elements, such as a brand name of the manufacturer, product information, country of origin and instructions (Nowogródzka et al., 2014:72-73).

According to Wolniak and Zadura (2012: 112): *"In a professionally designed package each item, detail has its place. Every straight line or a curve, tone colour, moving tone image, or a background blur carry a specific meaning."* In order the package could persuade to purchase a different product must affect the emotions of the consumer (Pelc, 2016: 40-41). Naturally, it is difficult to expect that for a consumer with high or low income a package had the same meaning. The differences may relate to the needs of the packaging in terms of whether the information, functional aspect or design are the most important.

However, while much easier to talk about the importance of packaging in the marketing brand communications with the consumer, so much more difficult to bring clearly how strong packaging influences the purchasing decisions of consumers. Asking consumers directly about the importance of packaging in their decisions, researcher can get similar results as in the case of advertising research. Consumers rationalize their purchasing decisions and generalize them very much (for different product categories meaning of product package may be different – think about toilet paper, dog food, or even cosmetics). Using quantitative methods may accumulate very declarative data (the consumer believes that the reason for his behaviour is that), but it does not necessarily coincide with the truth.

In the article the author decided to verify whether consumers actually pay attention to packaging in their purchasing process and what might limit this impact. The qualitative methods were used in the research.

### **3. Method**

The article uses the results of author's research, which was conducted in July 2016. Analysis served 20 ethnographies, which was conducted with 25 participants at age 18-26, who have a student status and have been living in Lublin at least six months. Since this consumer group is very diverse, the study involved people with different financial status, at a various marital and family status (single, not married and married students - all childless), and having different housing conditions (living at family home or own flat or lodging).

During the study of a participant purchase process the author attended the store chosen by the participant (the one which he/she usually chooses). The observation started at the moment of leaving the participant's home or place where he/she currently lives (except 2 persons, because they made shopping after work), going through the shopping (the purchase of minimum 10 food items)

and finishing again at home. At the end a participant (or participants, if the couple or marriage made shopping together) was briefly interviewed (for about 40 minutes) about their shopping habits. Participants were asked, among others, what is important for them when shopping and how they use their budget (what their priorities are), and how they perceive product packaging on the market.

**Figure 1. Example of completed purchases**



Source: The photo from the author's private archives (ethnography, 2016).

The average amount of individual ethnography lasted about 1-1.5 hour. The quantity of products purchased ranged from 11 to 35 products (typically 11-15). Due to a summer period, at which the study was carried out - the fruits and vegetables were often purchased. In the vast majority, purchases were carried out in one store. Only in two cases, purchases were divided into two shops and in the third case - vegetables and fruits were purchased at the nearby bazaar. The average shopping time was 10 minutes.

Young people are a very interesting research group, hence they were selected for this research. On the contrary to popular opinion - their financial situation is not so bad (young people often do not provide for themselves but they have the financial support from family and obtain a number of additional income in a form of scholarships or order contracts). Even paying the bills by themselves - especially in the Lublin province, which is an agricultural region – they often receive help from family in the shape of free vegetables, fruits, eggs and meat. Being at this age, consumers from Generation Y (Reisenwitz and Iyer, 2009: 92) are increasingly focused on

themselves and meet their own needs instead of the needs of the family (they decide to set up a family later). The result is that they may want to make a more hedonistic purchase and image-building purchases (especially in the context of intense activity in social media) than older consumers from Generation X.

#### **4. Results**

##### **a. Purchasing habits**

From a marketing point of view, the role of packaging involves triggering the desire to buy a product, which may lead to impulsive purchases. As the study showed, this task may appear to be difficult one because shopping routine has a considerable impact on consumers.

It is worth pointing out that each of the study participants had a fixed collection of products which they usually use to prepare meals. They are chosen at first place when they are available in a store. This strategy severely limits a potential promotional and sales role of packaging. Buying a new products on the market is constantly constrained by the consumer's attitude. If routine purchases are combined with reluctance to the testing of new products, it is very difficult to influence the consumer and encourage him to make an impulsive purchase which may be caused by attractive packaging. Aversion to novelty may both stem from fear of buying a product that does not fulfil expectations (which means both a waste of money and product), as well as concerns about potential health problems (e.g. testing products typical for other cultures). There were also opinions expressing the distance in relation to changes in the packaging itself, because this raises concerns whether the product is still original, or perhaps already faked. Changing packaging may suggest that a customer has to put additional efforts to assess the "authenticity" which is associated with generating negative emotions.

Secondly, the study revealed that consumers at this age group make shopping tasks very quickly. A short time spend for shopping is especially important for them and very often emphasized in later interviews, despite the fact that they most often declared they like to shop. The majority of the participants was moving through the store very quickly (the shortest period of purchases was amounted to 4 minutes, during which the participant had bought 13 products), stopping only at certain places and looking for a specific and well-known product on shelves (even in the case of shopping without a list). When the path of moving through the store was chaotic -

participants rarely stopped next to shelves to see the available products. In the case of purchasing with a partner, they often split up in the store to make shopping faster so that one person does not have to wait and waste time.

The need for a rapid shopping process may result from noticeable changes in society - namely the fast pace of life, which forces a change in the packaging designs (e.g. the package allows a faster preparation of a meal, for example packages suitable for inserting them in the microwave and/or so-called active packages that help to extend freshness for a longer time or so-called intelligent packages which for instance are capable of communicating the freshness or the temperature of a product in a simple way). Innovations in packaging from logistics, commodity science and ecological points of view become extremely important because they generate additional costs (which may, however, be an investment), but as shown by previous studies of the author - still are not noticed by consumers (Nalewajek, 2015: 1300).

A little different shopping perspective is created by motives known as "out of boredom" or "kill time", but it was a rare situation, which involved few participants only. This type of shopping causes a desire for staying in the shop and checking the available offer. Thus, while such purchases it is more likely to make unplanned purchases. However, the author got to know about this type of behaviour from the stories told by participants only and it did not happen during the observation.

Time of purchase is also reflected in knowledge of the store topography, where consumers usually go shopping. Most of the participants have their two or three favourite stores in which they shop, which are located in close proximity to the place of living or on the way from the work or university. Typically, these were shops, which can be reached within 10 minute walk (a car was used during two cases only). What is noteworthy, participants preferred a "medium-sized" shops - mainly Biedronka, Lidl and E.Leclerc - because of the perceived low prices and the wide range of products and Stokrotka - because of the opportunity to purchase cold cuts and other types of meat. Preferences of young people in terms of discounts do not differ from the rest of the society (PBS, 2015: 5-6).

Interestingly, not all products that were selected at first were left finally in a shopping trolley. Despite of the choice of a product, it happened that the product was removed from the trolley and replaced by another. Participants pointed out that they chose the better version of a particular product later, and argued the packaging did not have any influence on their decisions.

Naturally, despite the routine purchase, the impulse purchase happened but it relates to individual participants and involves the sweets packaging only. If this kind of purchase already happened, it was caused by the influence of a product only (e.g. when somebody saw a particular product on a shelf they thought about the lack of it at home). Interestingly, there were a situation in which package caught participant's attention (but during previous purchases which were made before the test), but before she bought the product she had asked the rest of her flatmates if she can buy it (it was a dishwashing liquid and flatmates shared the expenditure equally) and obtained their consent to buy it. However the product was bought during subsequent purchases (on the day of the survey).

Definitely, a rigid buying routine could be noticed more often among people who maintained themselves financially than among those who lived at family home. The size of household budget in both groups was different. A common practice observed during the study was the fact that despite the study participants had their own source of income (job, scholarships) they did not share a majority of common life costs, including nutrition, with parents they lived with. Their income was spent on lifestyle that can be described as hedonistic (expenditures mainly devoted for travelling, events, clothing, and cosmetics). For this group of consumers, appearance and image creation in a group of friends are very important.

#### **b. Selection of the store**

The specificity of the store may limit the impact of packaging on purchasing decisions. Observations have shown that several elements may significantly reduce an impact of packaging, e.g.:

- space in a shop – in small or local stores there is usually no room for standing in front of shelves at distance to see which products are available; this kind of shops are easily crowded, and it is harder for the consumer to choose the product calmly which may result in a desire to complete the purchase as soon as possible;
- the way of placing the goods and frequency of these changes - if the order of product groups in a store is mixed and arrange in an illogical for the consumer way, they spend more time searching for products planned to buy and they are less likely to look around for others;

- presentation of the product on a shelf - more and more frequently in shops is seen that products are put on shelves in bulk packages, so-called SRP (*Shelf Ready Package*). This practice can be especially observed in Lidl. This solution is more convenient for store employees (Packaging Poland, no date), but for the consumer can limit the potential interest in the product due to an attractive package (in terms of appearance or functionality). Unfortunately, when designing the unit package the producer usually forgets about the point of sale and often the unit package is "covered" by an unattractive bulk package, which is also frequently damaged by store employees who tried to open it. Therefore, well designed SRP is crucial, however, still is a lack of good practice in this area on the market (for example because the packages are designed by various departments – the unit package by the marketing department, while the SRP by the department of purchase (DS SMITH, 2016: 7)). The unit packaging cannot meet its promotional function, if it is in 80% covered by the bulk packages. Sometimes, the SRP project it is difficult for the consumer to find the product, he or she was looking for, say nothing of induce to buy another one. On the other hand, the same design of the packaging may also affect the amount of product variants, which can be put on the shelf. Well considered SRP can avoid extra charges for the storage space (e.g. at 6 versions of the product, if the SRP is designed for 2 rows of the product – it needs twice as much space as on the shelf, which is often not possible, therefore, 3 of 6 variants of the product are exhibit. It could be avoided if the SRP contained only 1 product row). In the case of some products - the number of available and visible on the shelf product variants can play a great importance (e.g. chocolate flavours). Some of them exposed on the shelf SRP did not use it the entire depth of the shelves, which also raises potential losses, as commodity less visible, less inclined to buy.

**Figure 2. Examples of wrong SRP**

Source: The photo from the author's private archives (ethnography, 2016).

### c. Shopping habits

The impact of packaging on purchasing decisions may be limited by shopping habits, e.g. the frequency and the size of one-time purchases. The study showed that young consumers who shop for yourself and/or with a partner, prefer to shop less, but more often (but this result requires confirmation in quantitative research), due to the reduction of potential waste, which would result from unused whole product before the expiry date and/or rotteness. The flat in which they live does not also allow for product storage (very small kitchens or kitchenettes), and in the case of substances - the additional necessity of sharing space with other flatmates (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Different amount of space in the kitchen**



Source: The photo from the author's private archives (ethnography, 2016).

In the study group, the vast majority of people went shopping with a list - not always formally written down, but in this case, rarely have purchased something over a list (up to 1 or 2 products). The list can serve one of two roles - to counteract multiple walking for shopping one day and/or afford to buy more products, which may also limit the impact of packaging.

#### **d. Increasing consumer awareness**

Despite the fact that the purchases were made very quickly, it could be noted that a large part of consumers in the first impulse, when he takes the package to the hand immediately reverses it and reads the information from the package. Sometimes it was only a brief glance at the label, sometimes even comparing the two (or more) of products between them. The talks carried out after the purchase, at the consumer's home, very often emphasized that the quality of the product was verified. The “product quality” was understood in a variety of ways:

- the quality expressed by the country of origin - products of better quality are products come from Poland or Germany (that is why favoured was shopping at Lidl), or as a last resort from EU, which elected of priority products from other countries/continents (eg. Asian products). They searched for signs typical for country of origin or specific to the country barcodes. One of participant declared the use of an application that verifies the country of origin - especially for cosmetics, but this application was not used through the study;

- the quality expressed by the simple, clear and short composition - for people who do not understand a specific designation in a product, it was important that the composition was short, written in a clear way (not covered, like, for example a sticker with price or promotion and written with an appropriately large font that allows acquainting with it);
- the quality expressed by the brand - the opinion on this issue were divided, but for some people branded product means higher quality, because such a brand cannot afford to make a mistake, because it has more to lose than the "unbranded" product. By then, the branded products are more expensive, what was understood that the manufacturer uses the best quality ingredients, which generally is perceived as higher product quality and a lower amount of food preservatives and colourings;
- the quality expressed by the composition of the product – in the study were people whose calorific value, as well as the ratios between the values of proteins, fats and carbohydrates were paramount for the choice of two similar products (some part of people applied concrete habits of calories counting, so it was for them very important). Such a person avoid the signs of "E", preservatives and flavour enhancers. For other people who represent a particular diet (e.g., vegans), it was crucial to verify the composition in terms of the search for the ingredients (e.g. of animal origin), which ruled out the product from the list of those that could buy. These persons were characterized by very knowledgeable about concrete components and were able to identify even the less obvious, whose name was quite difficult. In interviews, they admitted that they constantly educate themselves in this matter for instance by trying to consult information they have on Facebooks' groups with people sharing the same interest as they do.

All data collected in ethnography shows how important is clear and legible packaging design, as consumers are sensitive not only to widely understood design package but information which it contains.

An increase in awareness of the unfair marketing practices could. It was emphasized that the slogans on the labels are not precise, sometimes confusing, hence this is the reason to verify them in the composition of the product. Some of the participants buying juice realized that the slogan "100% juice" does not always mean that the juice was made of 100% fruits only and may communicate completely different message like e.g., 100% of vitamins or 100% of taste but also "100% juice" may also contain additional portion of sugar.

This data corresponds to the KPMG's research (KPMG, 2015: 34), which shows that smart shopper attitude was a dominant trend in the past years. However, it seems that nowadays and in next few years the aspect of paying attention to health and natural products namely the development of eco-consumer attitudes will gain in popularity.

The increase in consumer awareness was expressed in the consciousness of the basic practices of merchandising, especially in the case of arranging products (more willing to buy from the shelves at eye level), distribution of basic products over the store that you had to go almost the entire shop to collect basic assortment, placing bakery in the store space (to feel hunger, encourage larger purchases) and the role of packaging, which is to draw the consumer's attention and encourage them to purchase. In the case of the packaging, part of consumers admitted that they buy under the influence of the packaging (these were the people who do not have a specific nutritional plan and do not follow a specific diet), while others admitted that the packaging products are able to draw their attention and make a choose a different product (especially in the case of the category in which the product is not so important for them, because they buy small amounts of this product and rarely buying gives small potential to damage their health caused by a bad composition).

It can be easily noticeable how important for consumer is architecture of information on the package which in their eyes is often omitted by manufacturers/designers of packaging but which for them is very important. Consumers did not like the packaging overloaded with information. They were chosen by them only because of the positive experience with the product itself and not the positive reception of the package. The issues of functionality packages was often emphasised as well, which still leaves a big room for interpretation. For some participants not understandable was why, for instance, the breakfast cereals are not packed in boxes (as in the West), which would facilitate their usage and let to store them easier on a shelf, or why some packages have a "fancy shapes" that cause punctures in a shopping bag and make difficulties with bringing the product home.

But especially for eco-consumers design of the packaging did not matter. Verification packages at participants home on the shelves showed many products purchased by weight in plastic bags. Vegans emphasized that for them the choice of products is so narrow that the importance of packaging is marginal because of so small variety of these kind of products on the market.

It could also be seen as a kind of clever consumer, which is expressed by the attitude of the smart shopper - why overpay for something that just looks good and does not represent quality?

Therefore, the appearance of the packaging was not a criterion for selection of the product, the participants did not pursue to buy products in the most beautiful, well-designed package. In interviews they notes that they were not looking for "special" packages but that do not want to buy those that look cheap, because they feared the quality of these products and on this account some do not even want to verify their composition. On the other hand, one of the participants admitted that she likes to buy cheap products in such packaging, which suggests if bought something expensive.

## **5. Conclusion**

Conducting a study on the effect of packaging on purchasing decisions is an extremely difficult task because the decision of buying a particular item instead of another product may take a second. Various research methods can be closer at reaching the answers how the package is able to change the purchasing decisions but at the same time each of them is at stake of mistake. To a large extent, the researcher must rely on consumer's self-awareness and self-acceptance, through which they will not feel the need to distort their purchasing decisions because of the researcher's presence. At the same time, there is risk that researcher can be led to erroneous conclusions. During the observance in the research, several times the author had an impression that a participant buys a well-known product. However, later in the course of subsequent discussion, it turned out that in fact it was a spontaneous decision, which was made in a fraction of the time. It was hard to figure out what was the impetus for such behaviour. The answer that could be obtained was "I just wanted to buy it" without suggesting potential motivations.

Nevertheless, the study showed that there are several factors that can limit the impact of packaging. These are: buying habits and steaming from shopping routine and shopping habits, size and arrangement of commercial space of the store and increasing consumer awareness. Environmental concerns are not important enough for this group of consumers to influence change in buying behaviour. Despite declaring by some people that the quality of environment is an important topic to them - their environmental behaviour confined to a matter of post purchase behaviour, i.e. recycling garbage (but in some extend only).

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### *Czy opakowanie faktycznie sprzedaje?*

#### *Streszczenie*

Opakowanie jest bardzo ważnym instrumentem marketingowym. Pełni bardzo ważną rolę w strategii produktu, ale również jako narzędzie komunikacji marki z konsumentem. Dobre opakowanie powinno zachęcać do zakupu produktu, ale czy rzeczywiście konsumenci zwracają na nie uwagę w procesie zakupowym?

Artykuł prezentuje wyniki autorskich badań (etnografia) zrealizowanych w lipcu 2016 roku na młodych konsumentach (18-26 lat) mieszkających w Lublinie (Polska). W badaniu poddano obserwacji proces zakupowy produktów spożywczych realizowanych w typowy przez uczestnika sposób, w wybranym przez niego sklepie a następnie zrealizowano ok 40 minutowy wywiad na temat jego zwyczajów zakupowych.

Badanie pokazało szereg czynników, które ograniczają promocyjną funkcję jednostkowego opakowania produktu. Są to: zakupy rutynowe, niektóre zwyczaje zakupowe, specyfika przestrzeni handlowej danego sklepu oraz wzrost świadomości konsumenckiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etnografia, proces podejmowania decyzji zakupowych, młodzi konsumenci, opakowanie jednostkowe.