
The dumb husband test.

How to make each product in a range easy to tell apart, so even a distracted shopper brings home the right one.

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How to differentiate a range of products.

I'm married, very happily as it turns out. Despite being a relatively smart fellow (in my humble opinion), I'm sometimes accused by my wife of being dumb. None of us are perfect and there is no doubt that I do make some avoidable errors from time to time, just like my male friends. Like most men, we often lament our tales of woe, most of which are probably avoidable.

A lot of men are particularly prone to this criticism when it comes to shopping. Specifically, when being sent to the supermarket by their loving partners to get the right variant of a product, we often come back with the wrong one.

How does this occur? Certainly, us males often don't help ourselves, not paying attention, or getting out of the house quickly to avoid a longer list of requirements. But we would be helped considerably by clear and succinct communication of what is inside the pack we are buying.

We call this variant differentiation: providing enough clues on the pack to make it really clear what is inside, and how it differs from the one right next to it.

For example, let's consider canned soup. We are usually able to find the brand we want, but then we need to get the right variant.

"Now, was it beef stroganoff or beef and vegetables I was meant to get?"

"That's right, it's the red one with the carrots that I need."

If the variant differentiation has been thought through well, a short description of the exact product should ensure that you are able to choose the right one. Get it right and you get the nod of approval at home. Get it wrong and... don't go home.

To avoid this dilemma, we invented the Dumb Husband Test. To pass this test, a variant of a product should be well enough differentiated from the rest of its range that a "dumb husband" can quickly and easily find the right product and win brownie points at home. There are a number of ways of ensuring this differentiation, outlined below.

1 Using words

The simplest method, but usually not enough if used without other support. Sometimes the space on a pack, or the printing method, dictates that this is the only way to differentiate.

While it does tell a consumer the difference between the packs (or SKUs), there really is a minimal amount of information with which to make a decision. Words are also the least effective of the four communication factors on the Consumer Register.

2 Using colour

Colour is a far more effective way to tell the difference between SKUs, and is the primary factor in strong communication according to the Consumer Register. In a smaller range (four to six SKUs), colour is very effective as it allows very clear separation of variants. As a range grows, we tend to run out of colours to use, and so two SKUs may end up looking similar, simply because the colour wheel has a limited number of spokes.

A further consideration with colour is the relationship between the brand colour and the variant colour. If the brand colour is green (for example), it makes any green less effective as a variant colour, limiting the options.

3 Using images

Images on packaging are useful for a number of reasons. Not only can they help to show the variant, but used correctly they should also develop appetite appeal, enticing people to buy the product. Food packaging has two fundamental imagery options.

Serving suggestion. This is where the contents of the pack are shown on the packaging in the way they are intended to be used. For example, soup could be shown in a bowl with a spoon. Where the product is made of a number of recognisable ingredients (vegetable soup, for example), these ingredients may be subtly placed in the background to aid appetite appeal and variant differentiation.

Cameo ingredient. Often used where the product itself is not visually appealing, or is difficult to show, the individual ingredients are shown on the pack. Baby food, dips and yoghurts are often shown in this way. The individual shots of ingredients (or cameos) suggest the taste profile of the products and also help to differentiate, provided the ingredients differ between SKUs.

Photography is generally used for this purpose, as it provides a very clear visual representation of the product. A good photographer is also able to add mood and taste appeal with good lighting, depth of field and food styling. Issues with photography include ensuring that the right food is available (and in season), and that it is difficult to change once the final shots are taken.

Illustration can also be used. This is more flexible and does not require the actual product to be available. Done well, it can also position the product well. It is not as graphic and usually only works with certain pack designs.

4 Using shapes

Shape can also be used to differentiate, although this is difficult on its own. Sometimes the actual pack shape can change slightly (such as with Coke and Fanta), or the graphic shapes on a pack can change.

In order to pass the Dumb Husband Test, your packaging must differentiate clearly.

Use the techniques above to ensure that it does. If you are still not sure, send your packaging design to me for a no-strings-attached critique.

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