

The Power of Packaging

BY JASON PRESS

G2 BRANDING AND DESIGN

In most cases, marketers think that retail is “a good place” to build a brand’s identity. Eighty-three percent of those responding to a *Reveries.com* survey said so.

That’s not terribly surprising, given that retail is where brands are bought and sold — where consumers turn into shoppers and brand identities meet their bottom lines.

If the retail environment is not a good place for a brand’s identity to rise and shine, it’s hard to imagine what is.

Unfortunately, as we all

know, retail is not always the friendliest of places. As many of the survey respondents noted, stores tend to be cluttered and retailers often have priorities other than promoting anyone’s brand identity but their own.

In fact, only 12 percent of the respondents said retailers were “helpful” when it comes to supporting a manufacturer’s brand objectives. Thirty-one percent said retailers were a “hindrance.” Forty-one percent said retailers were both a help and a hindrance!

The question is what to do about it. Obviously, that’s a question with some complexity to it, but one survey respondent put it very succinctly: “Brand identity on the package is the most important space to own. The retailer can’t touch it.”

Cleaner and simpler is better when building brand identity at retail.

It’s a great point, and one that was supported by an overwhelming majority of those taking the survey — 77 percent confirmed that “packaging” is the tactic that has worked best to support brand identity at retail.

The power of packaging at retail certainly is formidable. One of my favorite examples of that power is AeroBed, which actually used its packaging to transform its business at retail.

Anyone who has ever slept on an AeroBed inflatable mattress knows what a high-quality product it is. But that fact was hidden from consumers by low-quality packaging and marketing communications — not surprising because late-night television was AeroBed’s main marketing channel.

When AeroBed decided to expand into high-end retail outlets, its packaging was a central feature of its strategy to re-position the brand as a premium product. It didn’t matter much what the box looked like when AeroBed was a mail-order product, but now that it was moving into upscale stores, it needed a high-image package to match.

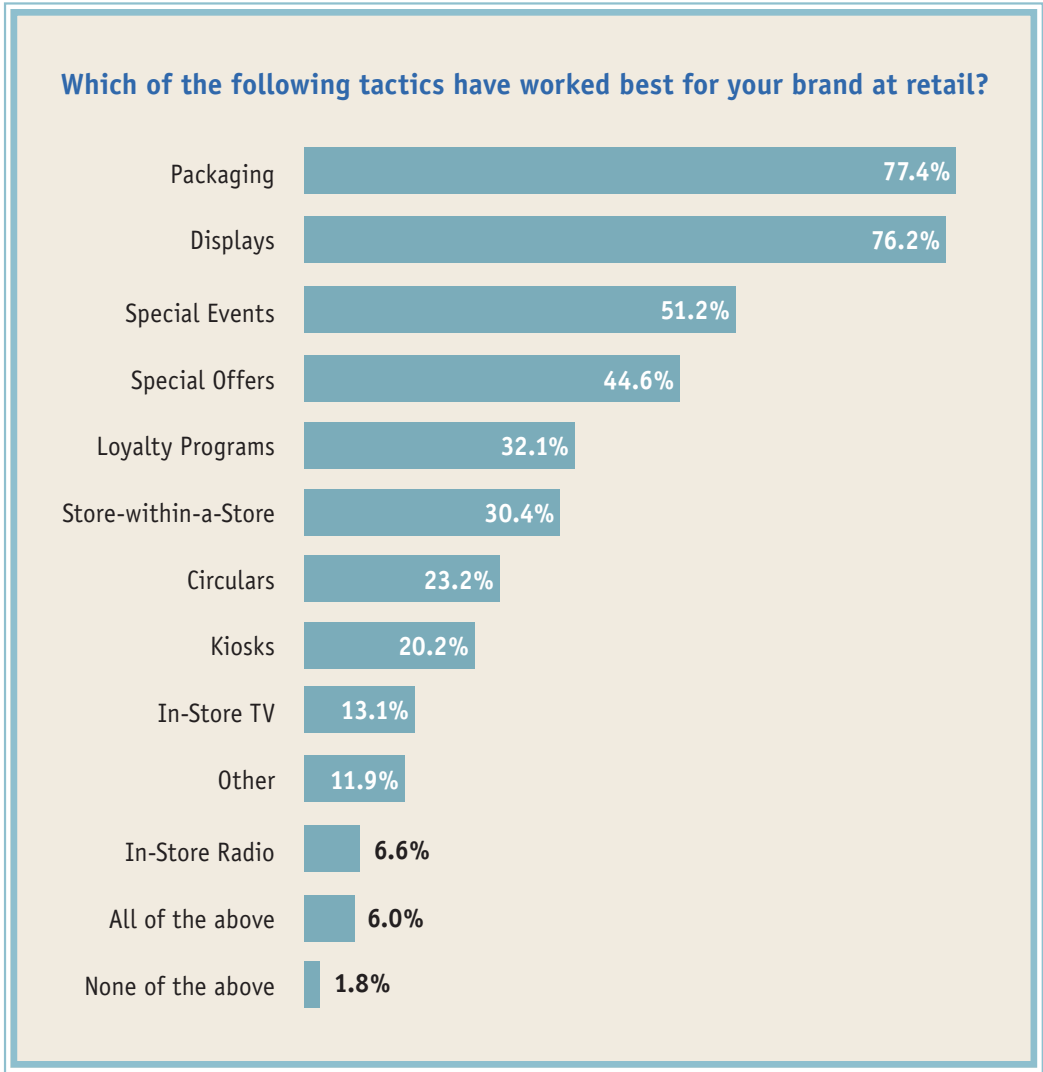
AeroBed’s new package not only conveys the high quality of the product inside, but also reinforced a very simple message — that AeroBed is all about a comfortable night’s sleep. When the boxes are stacked, it creates a billboard effect in the store that clearly conveys the brand’s essence. It looks great, tells a story and is hard to miss.

In some stores, for a brief period of time, the old packaging sat next to the new. One retailer actually

In most cases, is retail a good place to build your brand’s identity?



SOURCE: *Reveries.com*



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marked down AeroBeds in the old packages by 30 percent—even though the product inside was virtually the same. But despite the higher price point, AeroBeds in the new package sold twice as fast.

The AeroBed lesson applies to almost any kind of product in any kind of store—the simpler and cleaner the packaging the better. Too often, packages are jammed with every conceivable selling point instead of communicating the one thing that’s going to make the shopper stop, take notice, and make a decision to buy the brand.

Less is indeed more when it comes to packaging. We also found this to be true when we re-designed packaging for McAfee, a software brand. In McAfee’s case, the simple message is that the product inside is for professionals and that it is easy to use. Of course, with any software product there is a lot of information

that needs to be conveyed to the shopper. That’s why we chose to consolidate and confine the technical specifications to the back of the box and an inside flap, keeping the front of the package clean and uncluttered.

Pantone offers another great example. A recent issue of THE HUB featured a case study about the packaging for *huey*, a new tool for graphic designers from Pantone (“The Color of Ideas,” Nov./Dec. ‘06).

Because *huey* was designed for creative thinkers who tend to use Macintosh products, its packaging was expressly designed to align with the Apple Store retail format. As we all know, the hugely successful Apple Store environment is itself a paragon of clean, uncluttered design.

That’s as it should be. After all, as the *Reveries.com* survey respondents noted, “clutter” is a major obstacle to building brand identity at retail. The last thing



SOURCE: *Reveries.com*

we should be doing is adding more clutter with our package designs.

The world would indeed be a happier place if everybody simplified their packages and there were fewer messages being thrown at shoppers at retail.

The problem seems to be that too few marketers truly understand the difference between “shopper” marketing and “consumer” marketing.

The challenge is to design packaging in a shopper’s “on-the-go” mindset instead of a consumer’s “on-the-sofa” mindset.

The heart of the issue from an organizational standpoint is underscored in a set of questions toward the end of the *Reveries.com* survey.

The first question was: Does your brand have a retail strategy? Seventy-three percent said “yes.” The next question was: Is your organization ready to maximize the building of brand identity at retail? Only 44 percent said “yes.”

That’s a big drop-off. A few survey participants mentioned the classic divide between sales and marketing as a key obstacle. That’s certainly a problem at many companies. Several traced the problem to the influence of, as one respondent put it, a “corporate culture of advertising.” That’s a possibility, too.

Still others noted a disconnect between those who design the packages and those who implement “shopper marketing” at retail. In my experience, that’s

very true. Depending on the size of the organization, the packaging and the promotion people might not even know each other.

AeroBed, McAfee and Pantone all had the advantage of being relatively smaller organizations where the package-design and retail people worked together closely. At packaged-goods companies, which can be huge, the opportunity for that kind of collaboration can be limited.

At the risk of sounding glib, it’s time to tear down those silos and bring the packaging and the “shopper marketing” people together. The opportunity to succeed — and the danger of failure — is too great to risk on anything but a more integrated approach.

Given the rising power of the retail trade, much is at stake. But the opportunities are big as well. As the *Reveries.com* survey suggests, the power of packaging is the greatest tool at your disposal to build your brand’s identity — along with its sales — at retail. ■



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