

Visual Brand Identity of Food Products: A Customer's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The aim of this research is to explore the benefits of a customer based approach on food packaging design. A case study of a small production honey brand is used.

Design/methodology/approach – For the design process, a survey that involved visual elements was conducted as an online questionnaire. The final size of the sample consists of 285 questionnaires.

Findings – The research findings indicate that packaging is a great influencer for consumers and the synergy of consumers with companies can be a catalyst for the product design process resulting in package designs, which engage potential customers and drive sales.

Originality/value – According to this research high potential lies in the area of a customer driven package design process and thus it should be further investigated.

KEY WORDS: *Food Packaging / Design/ Visual Identity / Branding / Consumer Behavior*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A logical observation is that the primary contact made between customers and the product is the packaging, which proves to be critical prior to actually testing the product. Consumers spend approximately 3-5 seconds examining a product on the shelves of supermarkets. Therefore packaging acts on two distinct levels: covering the product and revealing its attributes. If the image is meaningful,

the reader will receive important information on the content and the background of the product. In this sense and given the limited timeframe, design has to be accurate, functional and persuasive. Moreover, nowadays, demand for brand renewal and new approaches in promoting food products increases, as an outcome of the realization that design is the most effective mean of successful communication. Based on this notion the present study attempts to explore the impact of packaging design in the development of product identity of

food products and perceive the intended meaning of consumer behavior towards packaging. The study has set three core objectives: First, to perform a literature review on packaging design and its connection to the consumer decision process. Secondly, to gather and interpret consumer insights on packaging in terms of an indicative product category (honey products) and finally to implement the most significant research findings in a design concept that would showcase potential feature subsets for successful packaging of honey products.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Packaging & Food Products

In general, food products fall under the low-involvement product category as they most commonly feature low value and high volume [1]. Purchases of such products are characterized by limited amount of time spent on the searching and decision making process [2]. In this case, the visual image proves to be critical in communicating product attributes and attracting the consumer at the point of purchase [3]. Recognizing the fact that visual product attributes are a key success factor in the competitive environment of today's food market, packaging rightfully tops the list as the most engaging for consumers in the decision making process [4].

2.2 Packaging Design & Packaging Attributes

The definition of package design as described by Orth and Malkewitz [5] is "the various elements chosen and blended into a holistic package design to achieve a particular sensory effect. Designers choose design elements, decide how to mix them, and determine the desired level of congruity among them". Creativity implemented as a balanced combination of shape, color and graphics constitutes the package design. The ultimate goal is to evoke

such an emotional appeal on the consumer that will persuade him to eventually buy the product [6]. For the purposes of this research four main packaging attributes that potentially influence consumer purchase decisions are adopted from Silayo and Speece, [7]. They are separated into two distinct categories; the visual and the informational elements. The visual elements are subdivided into graphics and size/shape of packaging. The informational elements consist of product information and information regarding the technology applied on the package (Fig.1).

2.3 Packaging & Branding

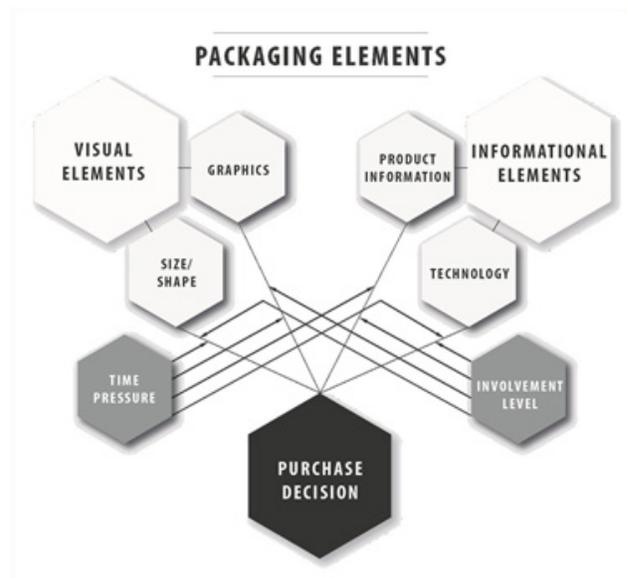


Figure 1. Packaging Elements

Demanding market conditions force companies to pioneer in order to gain competitive advantage. To achieve that, they develop solutions in the context of innovative entrepreneurship and inventive marketing. In terms of creative marketing, firms increasingly acknowledge packaging and packaging design as a valuable asset of differentiating their product against its market opponents [8].

The effective differentiation lies in the product's ability of fulfilling customer requirements better than competitor offerings [9]. From a consumer perspective brand preference refers to the inclination of selecting a particular brand in a single product category. During this decision process packaging design can function as a brand builder and offer the competitive edge for the product in question [10]. Yamoah [11] stated that packaging is crucial in differentiating a product among assorted agricultural food products, and that a well-designed package can provoke positive consumer response for the specific product. Designers and marketers should therefore, strategically attempt to capitalize on this fact by trying to analyze and interpret how various emotional reactions are involved in building brand perception. Ampuero and Vila [12] deliberated the need to comprehend consumer perception and transform the knowledge into design solutions as to reach the preferred positioning in consumers' minds. Their results indicate that each positioning strategy shows linkage with particular packaging aspects. The connections between consumer preferences and design dimensions of packaging in diverse market segments are a matter of importance for brands that marketers of packaged food products must examine in order to plan holistic marketing strategies.

2.4 Packaging & Consumer Behavior

Clement [13] argues that 90% of consumers decide on a product based only on its front image, hence packaging, without even attempting a physical contact. Their decision is purely optical and the common quote "what you see is what you get" can be actually rephrased in "what you see is what you choose". A proportion of the customers believe that they review product characteristics and they tend to consider the package as equivalent to the product [14]. Research findings indicate that consumer behavior towards visual elements of packaging has a straight impact on perceptible product quality and

brand choice. According to OgilvyAction and their study, "Shopper Decisions Made In-Store" (SDMIS) [15], 'Shoppers' are looking to be interested in brands in-store. Despite the fact that consumers have generally pre-decided what kind of products they will purchase, 28% of them make their final decision, meaning the brand selection, in-store. Likewise, 1 out of 10 purchasers may change their brand preference inside the shop. Consequently, food companies must embody packaging design in their marketing plan development [16].

Nevertheless, there is more than one way of comprehending consumer behavior. Silayoi and Speece [7] detected thinking patterns regarding the interpretation of packaging and they further identified three main categories that present great similarity index globally. The first one emphasizes on convenience, the second one in information and the last one is related to image. They further suggest that designers should take into consideration that all three supplementary ways of thinking must be somehow expressed on the package. However, conflicting market trends in consumer attitudes create demanding conditions for food package designers. Several clients set more weight on label details, due to the fact that they are progressively becoming nutrition savvy [17]. In addition, the need for greater convenience of use and portability is somewhat common worldwide among urban consumers. Usability can be translated in terms of product technology. As Silayoi and Speece [14] point out, consumers, value technology that decreases the time spent on food preparation. Less complicated technology, as perceived by the customer at the point of sale, is considered equally significant with other technology related features like food protection, safety and convenience of user. Futrell [18] also suggests that a crucial factor influencing packaging design is demographic characteristics of the target audience as they reflect in the purchasing behavior. Consumers utilize mind associations in order to

evaluate products based on previous experiences and they furthermore categorize products based on resemblances that very often apply to visual attributes. Therefore, designers should take into consideration all available consumer data in order to set their packages compatible with their target market.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Consumer centricity is based in the common acceptance that if you can focus to your consumers and their needs better than your competitors can, then you are able to exploit any possible solution to fulfill those needs, including offered products, prices, promotions that may occur as well as marketing and the in-store experience. It is important for a company to understand the continuously changing consumer needs and requirements and to reinforce and complement the traditional strategies in order to stand out from the rest and be successful [19]. For example, one of the most important factors for successful sales of a product is packaging. An interesting, eye-catching packaging that triggers consumers' curiosity, interest and imagination can lead in an increase of product sales and re-in force the brand name [6]. Based on these arguments, a customer survey was considered essential in order to fully leverage and integrate consumer insights in the design process.

3.2 Purpose

The primary objective of the present paper was to define at what level the packaging of a product can affect the decision making process from a consumer's perspective and detect important factors, which are influencing competitive advantage in a specific product category, honey products. The aim of the last section, in particular, 'Packaging design of honey products' was to expose and

interpret the most important influencing factors of the consumers' choices.

3.3 Approach & Strategy

Due to the limited timeframe for the completion of the research, a quantitative method was chosen in order to collect factual data for the consumer behavior towards packaging of food products and honey products in particular. The survey was conducted online in the form of a questionnaire that was completed anonymously by the participants in order to encourage honesty and avoid bias. This allowed the relatively fast collection of adequate data that could be easily categorized and effectively analyzed. Moreover, the survey involved visual elements to keep the respondents intrigued and to further assist the researcher in the interpretation of consumers' intentions.

3.4 Data Collection

The final size of the sample consisted of 285 questionnaires. The questionnaire contained mostly closed, direct questions (dichotomous, multiple choice and importance questions) in order to facilitate the analysis of the data.

The purpose of the first section was to establish the consumers' behavior towards packaging when purchasing goods. This was attempted under the scope of multidimensional aspects of packaging (visual and informational elements). In the first section, the respondents were called to specify at which level packaging is influencing their purchasing decisions as well as their considerations on the importance of packaging in selling products.

The second section was designed in order to record the consumers' behavior and habits towards honey products in particular. Moreover, the aim was to determine the consumers' needs and expectations on the specific product category.

The questions of the third section aimed at identifying tangible connections in consumers' minds

for honey as a physical product in order to derive useful information for the packaging concept generation. In this section, participants were eventually asked to choose among 10 packaging design alternatives of honey products. Each design was selected for its specific set of attributes based on the 2 categories adopted from Silayoi and Speece [7]: visual and informational elements. The number of the items was kept to the minimum in order to include as many characteristic combinations of attributes as possible. The survey was concluded with a short demographics section in order to facilitate linkage and categorization of the results.

Survey Sample

The questionnaire was distributed online to a targeted online sample that included students of the International Hellenic University, connections of a social network and the connections of the aforementioned categories in Greece. However, these channels did not exclude international participations and therefore the questionnaire was presented in two languages (English and Greek). The survey was open to submissions for duration of 15 days. This period was considered appropriate to gather an adequate amount of responses, while keeping the irregular enlargement of the target audience under relevant control.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through Google forms for the summary of the responses and the general observations, while more thorough analysis was performed in SPSS™. The SPSS™ analysis allowed the linkage of factors that were considered of high relevance and importance to the survey and the further development of design concepts.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Sample Composition

Amongst the respondents, 47% were male and 53% were female. A majority of the respondents (57%) were between 26-35 years old, while 26% between 18-25 years old. The education level of the 87% of the sample was Bachelor Degree and higher. High variety is observed in the household consistency, where each category received almost equal % of the sample, 1 person per household (p/h) 26%, 2 p/h 24%, 3 p/h 25%, 4 p/h 19%. Based on these, it can be said that the sample presents a certain level of homogeneity that can provide useful insights of a savvy and active, in terms of consumption, part of the population.

4.2 Summary of Responses

Packaging

A noticeable 66% of the respondents did acknowledge the products' packaging in their recent purchases. The safety of the product was highly appreciated as well as the packaging materials. The same cannot be claimed for the instructions on the package that received a slightly negative amount of attention (51%). On the contrary, the visual design of the package appears to be a strong contact point with consumers and most of them admit that packaging impacts their shopping behavior (85%). In the last 2 questions, the respondents were asked to define the level of importance aesthetically (7) and informatively (8) regarding the role of packaging in the selling of a product in a 1 to 5 scale. The results were rather clear both from an aesthetic and an informative point of view, with 69% and 70% selecting between 4 and 5 respectively (Fig.2).

Honey Products

The reasons prevailing on the honey consumption among the respondents are the health benefits, the fact that it is a natural product and finally its taste. The majority of the participants consume honey products during morning hours while many others admit to consume honey anytime during the day. Consumers reported to buy honey regularly with highest the frequency of 1 time per month. All available market quantities appear to get a significant market share with the most popular that of 1kg. In Greece, in the specific product category brand name importance is almost negligible while most consumers obtain their supplies directly from producers. In a possible purchase of honey products, information of origin hit the top of consumers'

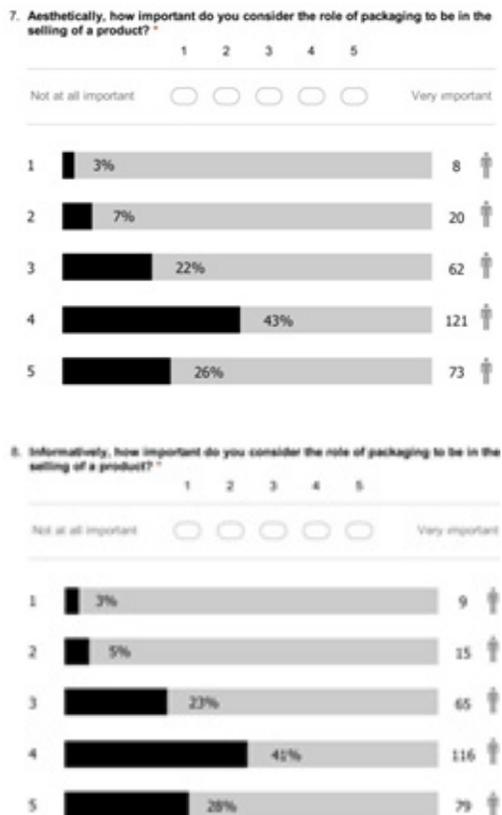


Figure 2. Response Infographic of Questions 7 and 8

priorities, followed by value for money, nice and convincing packaging and nutrition information. Finally, other honey products such as royal jelly, pollen, propolis and wax, while being acknowledged, are not widely used.

Packaging design of honey products.

The last section attempted to extract from consumers' minds connections relating to honey and packaging design attributes. According to the responses received, the dominant color in relation with honey was gold, following yellow and brown. The majority of the participants connected honey mostly with the polygon rather than the circle. Moreover, the most preferred container for honey was a jar and the associated material glass. The 'image' question, where participants were called to choose among 10 honey packaging designs, presented some tendencies but not an absolute 'winner' since the percentages were relatively close to one another. The top three products scored 24% (Fig.3.a), 16% (Fig.3.b) and 13% (Fig.3.c) of the total consumer responses. The final question was based on the previous and participants had to choose which aspects of packaging influenced their decision. At this point and since price and quality were a given, design was the main criteria of consumers' choice. Materials of the packaging as well as graphics and illustrations were taken into consideration. Protection and package instructions were hardly influential.

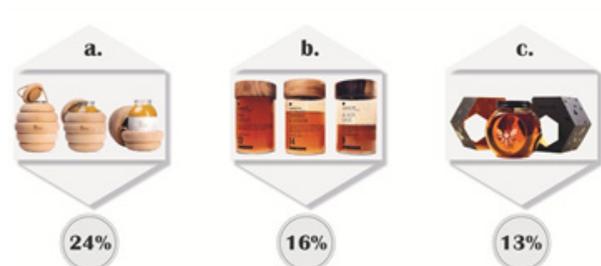


Figure 3. Alternative Honey Packaging Designs

5.0 DESIGN CONCEPT

5.1 Introduction

The definition of package design as described by Orth and Malkewitz [5] is “the various elements chosen and blended into a holistic package design to achieve a particular sensory effect. Designers choose design elements, decide how to mix them, and determine the desired level of congruity among them”. Package design can build on the resourcefulness, intellectual property and further improve the company’s capabilities [25]. Creating packaging that is congruent with a product’s attributes can therefore help to form more appropriate expectations and can thus potentially enhance the consumer’s consumption experience [26]. Various attributes of a product’s packaging (e.g., its typeface and shape) can be used to help communicate specific product attributes and to prepare the consumer for a particular consumption experience [27]. The present study was conducted in order to identify consumers’ needs among others and to assist in the development of design concepts for a specific product category with a consumer-centric approach.

5.2 Design Principles

Food and drink items are thought out as low-involvement products. In low involvement decision making, evaluation of elements appears to be less important, thus an eye-catching part, as graphics and color, turns out to be more significant in the purchase of a low involvement product [28]. As far as graphics concern, they involve color combinations, image layout, typography, illustrations and the final presentation transmits an image. Particularly for low involvement products, where initial impressions at the point of sale can have lasting impact in consumers’ minds, the package is the product [29].

A dimension of packaging that greatly affects the decision making process is that of size and

shape. Consumers tend to make simplified judgments regarding product volume or value based on these elements. For example, they generally consider more elongated packages to be bigger, regardless if they frequently buy the specific products and they are aware of their exact content [30]. Thus, an elongated container should result in consumers’ perception of the package as a value for money and thus result in better sales.

Moreover, as the tendency to a healthier diet grows, food labeling is becoming an ideal ambassador for product information that allows consumers to thoroughly examine other possible choices and make conscious food choices [17]. However, consumer purchase of low involvement products is usually not made by cautiously checking product information. Simple and accurate information, well presented, influences their decision favorably [14]. Last but not least, packaging technology may be the most important attribute and this technological image on the package expands the consumer’s prospect to buy. The message that technology communicates is about how convenient and ease of use the product is and as the results suggest urban consumers consider technology more convenient [7].

5.3 Approach

Package attributes such as color, shape, and material were considered important issues. However, the parameter that was considered as the most fundamental in the concept creation was the image selection question of the questionnaire (“21. Based on the packaging design, which these 10 products would you purchase?”). This, in correlation with the questions regarding color, shape, container and materials defined the concept scenario with the use of descriptive statistics. Question 21 was selected due to the fact that it basically mirrors consumers’ likelihood to choose a specific package among other competing packages of the same product category. It involves insights for package



Figure 4. Brand Name



Figure 5. Typography & Logotype

attractiveness, differentiation and what consumers actually want. The 3 top answers (options 2, 5, and 9) of question 21 (Fig. 3) were used and the preferred packaging characteristics related to those responses were defined through SPSS™ analysis and the use of a descriptive statistics method: crosstabs.

Each package was selected as a representative of specific packaging characteristics and each one addresses consumers' senses in a unique and particular manner. At a closer look, option number 2 (Fig. 3. a) is basically a package that functions as an object itself. Surprisingly pleasant, it is playful, interactive and invites the user to participate in more vibrant way. Option number 5 (Fig. 3. b) on the other hand communicates a nostalgic fascination

of a bygone era through its sterile typography and homage to the beauty and timelessness the refined practice of honey production. The harmonic combination of patterns and traditional materials conveys trust, familiarity and originality. Last but not least, option number 9 (Fig. 3. c) is characterized by innovativeness and minimalism. It combines the hexagonal shape of reference with a clear not over loaded message. It is a modern approach that aims for elegance and refinement.

From the SPSS™ crosstabs it is rather clear that the consumers' major preferences do not diversify regarding their perception on color, shape, container and material for the honey products. However, as described above there are significant differences in



Figure 6. Jar 580ml



Figure 7. Flavor variations

the consumer perception that each selected package represents. Consequently, even with the same selection of the package's physical attributes entirely different packaging approaches are possible.

5.4 Design Concept

5.4.1 Brand Name

A brand name selection was considered indispensable for proceeding in the design concept generation. However, the procedure of the name selection will not be analyzed in the theoretical context of this research. The brand name selected for the honey products is: "Melitimo". The word "Melitimo" is a combination of "meli (μέλι)" which in Greek means honey and "politimo (πολύτιμο)"

which in Greek means precious. The brand name aims to convey supreme quality in an elegant fashion and basically identify honey with the notion of richness and abundance. (Fig. 4)

5.4.2 Typography and Logotype

For the logo design playful rounded graphics were preferred as they were considered more appealing, more pleasing and less annoying than more linear and strict solutions. However, the exterior smoothly blended circles gradually evolve to a central hexagon in order to resemble a diamond emblazonment and a honeycomb cell simultaneously. The whole synthesis is crowned with a half bee figure with outspread wings that represents the sleepless guardian of honey from its creation to its final recipient.

The typography and fonts selection follows the same thinking pattern. It aims to create a sense of familiarity with a sort of hand written brand name and originality with a clear descriptive information display. Variations of the logotype were also created to serve different applications of the Brand name for marketing reasons or product specifications. (Fig. 5)

5.4.3 Colors

The colors palette consists of earthy tones that combined create the unique and timeless color of gold. Primary goal is to convey quality and the overall refined practice of honey production through something valuable and gold can definitely provoke this perception.

5.4.4 Material and Container

The material and container chosen for the honey product, following consumers' demand, is the glass and the jar. A particular glass jar is selected, straight sided and wide- mouth, which provides greater user convenience as it is excellent for difficult to dispense foods such as peanut butter and honey. The product will be available in two quantities : 314ml and 580ml (Fig. 6). Therefore, two jar sizes are designed respectively. The straight sided jar with the continuity of its lid allows the shape of the package to appear taller and more elongated. This results in positive value and quantity perceptions from a consumer perspective. The stickers applied on the container include the logo, the brand name and the most substantial information regarding the specific honey product in order to avoid the overload of the product's image.

5.4.5 Flavor Variations

Honey production is highly diversified with numerous forest and floral categories and a combination of those. According to the most common production available in the selected region of Halkidiki and Central Macedonia the honey varieties

that the brand will offer to the market are: 1) Pine, 2) Pine - Polygonum, 3) Pine - Erica, 4) Blossom & 5) Chestnut.

Each variant is represented by a particular flavor reflected on the packages through the variants color scheme. The color palette is enriched with vivid and playful shades which refer directly to the specific honey's plant origin. These variants however retain a common design base in order for the brand to stand out ahead of its subcategories (Fig. 7).

5.4.6 Carton Package

The carton package design aims for a harmonic combination of brand character, variants, patterns and information. It is characterized by innovativeness and minimalism. The external sides of the carton state the specific variant vividly and display a clear, not overloaded message for the consumer. The hexagonal shape of the cell reference is implemented as a mean to transparency and visual contact with the product. The package invites the consumer to explore it in order to gain access to more detailed descriptive information. It is a modern approach that aims for elegance and refinement in a playful and interactive manner (Fig. 8).

5.4.7 Limited Edition or Gift Box

Last but not least, a limited Edition Box, or alternatively a gift box, is designed in order to address the market need for a more versatile package that functions as an object itself. The concept idea derived basically of the typical matchbox logic. A wooden frame and a cardboard containing the glass jar. The natural wood material conveys trust and originality while the brands logo is engraved on top of it. The brand character remains unabridged with slight graphic display alterations to meet the new package requirements (Fig. 9).



Figure 8. Carton Package

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

In the empirical part of the study a perceptible method approach was used and the results were acquired from a survey conducted as an online questionnaire. The responses provided information about consumers' considerations on packaging as an influential factor of purchase decisions, consumers' behavior regarding honey products and finally consumers' perception and attraction on different design packages and packaging attributes in relation with honey products. The conclusions of the research were analyzed and also presented.

In consistence to the research findings packaging can and shall be used to increase retail performance as it is a great influencer for consumers when



Figure 9. Gift Box

it comes to purchasing a product and it is considered to hold a significant role aesthetically and informatively in the selling of a product. Traditional roles such as the protection of the product from damage are highly appreciated. In addition, though, consumers use packaging materials and information as a way to evaluate the actual product and eventually proceed in a purchasing decision. The design elements have different levels of impact in the creation of product perception. Visual elements such as graphics and illustrations receive greater consumer attention than instructions and package information. Therefore, the findings of this study support earlier studies that have registered packaging as a marketing transmitter [7], [20] “used to capture consumer attention” [21], which influences the consumer to place the product high on his preferences [22] and lead him at the purchase of the product [23], [24].

According to the collected data regarding honey products consumers buy honey regularly with preference to a medium sized package of 1kg. In the specific product category, brand name importance is almost negligible since most consumers obtain their supplies directly from producers. However, from a market perspective, in a possible purchase of honey products information of origin is the top priority in consumers' minds, followed by value for money, nice and convincing packaging and nutrition information. Packaging is the image of the

product and can function as a conveyor of legal and other descriptive information, including information of origin and nutrition. As such, it becomes clear that packaging concentrates most of consumers' considerations and demands. Therefore, a packaging design investment is certainly recommended for the building of a strong competitive advantage comparing to other market honey products.

Finally, conflicting trends in consumer decision making has made the interpretation of data regarding honey packages challenging. The research conclusions show that various designs attract with different elements. The honey package designs that were used in the questionnaire provide the evidence that design elements such as graphics, illustrations, color, product information, and shape of the package complete different aspects. The prevailing design justifies Clement [13], who stated that "packaging that contains a distinct shape, color, orientation, contrast or size will attract consumers' visual attention and influence peoples' reaction and buying behavior regardless of their specific brand preferences". In addition, Rundh [6] states that in some cases packages may appeal to consumers due to their perceived multifunctionality, something that certainly applies in the particular design which basically imitates a natural beehive.

6.1 Discussion

A product's success is measured by its market success and the leading actors in this process are consumers. Obviously, a survey provides customer insights and useful information for individuals and for business concerning the development and selection of proper design components that will be assigned to their product package. Through the survey, consumers' needs and desires are recorded and become subject of interpretation and evaluation that can maximize the package's effect in marketing food products.

Product's perceptions, as well as product's desirability by the consumer, are key factors for creating a well designed package. Both the package and the packaging design are the components which provide differentiation for the products among other. Along with the consumer's attitudes, they are crucial parameters for the marketing plans. The synergy of consumers with companies in the design process can create packages which engage the potential customers and drive sales for the products in question. This research concludes that the consumer and the packaging are two crucial parameters that can assist designers in the packaging design process and marketers in the development of marketing strategies. It is, finally, suggested that high potential lies in the area of customer driven package design process and thus it should be further investigated.

6.2 Limitations

Admitting that the study maintains valuable insights as concerns packaging and consumer perception towards packaging design, it is not without error margins. The study was run through a limited product sample and with regard to honey products only. As a result the information gathered by the survey is limited and may not necessarily apply to other products, contexts and environments.

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