

CULTURE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MESOAMERICAN PACKAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars long have recognized that a product's packaging is a visible and surrogate statement of the quality of the product (Twede 1997, Flockton 1999). Indeed, packaging is the manufacturer's way of presenting and communicating the many facets of the product in the best light. It addresses the functional dynamics associated with product protection and transportation as well as reflecting the aesthetics and nuances of the culture from which the product container originates.

"The painter with red and black ink is an artist, a creator of things with black water. The painter designs out of coal, he draws, he prepares the black color, grinds it and applies it. The good painter, having God in his heart, was able to perceive colors and shades and apply them to draw feet, faces, trace shadows or create a sunlit effect. All colors applied to objects as if a Tolteca paints all the colors of flowers. The poor painter, with a tattered heart, provokes the ire of the people because he cannot bring out the beauty in nature. A cheater, he always deceives by paling the true color and masking the beauty with dark shades that recall the night. He paints in vain, his creations lack the lightness and produces the paintings at random, disfiguring the faces of the objects."¹

This quote illustrates the subtle contribution of art to society. It is from this Náhuatl inheritance that we find the roots of the craftsman, who helps to place a face or meaning to his art. The craftsman not only makes ceramics, stone boxes and paper from natural fibers the craftsman also imparts a spirit and an art to the object, which then culminates in a form of communication.

Normally, packaging is thought of as a vital component or activity of the distribution system. Optimally, packaging serves to protect and preserve its contents during movement. Packaging also is a form of communication that provides information about the product's purpose. Furthermore, the packaging of a product increasingly conveys an image that the ultimate purchaser wants to project (e.g., the packaging of Godiva chocolates emphasizes elegance and good taste). The first type of communication is superficial; it merely provides information. The second level of communication is more subtle, difficult to express and has different meanings to each consumer. Yet, underlying these two levels of communication is a lower, much more established form that provides the foundation for these higher levels. The gradual evolution of culture is embodied in each product's packaging, but the notion of culture's historical influence is not readily apparent in the packaging.

Marketers in manufacturing firms have largely concentrated on the first two levels in their efforts to target different cultures, whether the target market is domestic or foreign. Technology has helped to enable globalization and has increased the standardization vs. adaptation debate among academics and practitioners (Levitt 1983, Dyer and Song 1997). For instance, technology and globalization has made it very easy for producers to explain the nature of their product, thus satisfying the first level of communication. Arguably, technology and globalization has made it easier to tap into the second level, which is largely an appeal to the consumer's ego. Although culture provides the foundation for packaging's functional and aesthetic values, the debate over standardization and adaptation rarely includes a study of the target culture's history to help determine the product's packaging. A product's packaging is a tangible aspect of marketing to different cultural segments and is a crucial element of the marketing mix.

The overarching objective of this paper is to present the argument that one of the other functions packaging has inherited, which is not readily acknowledged, is its role as a subtle communicator of society's cultural nuances. This level or form of communication provides the basis for the two more tangible levels of packaging's communication, which are attributed to the functional role (information

¹ Náhuatl text prior to the Spanish conquest. Códice Matritence Academia fol 15.

communication) and the aesthetic role (ego communication). Above all, packaging's responsibilities to the functional and aesthetic roles of marketing are manifested through its allegiance to culture and society.

There is little doubt that culture is a vital part of packaging. Indeed, culture evolves through society's norms and traditions, which ultimately can be reflected in tangible aspects, such as the materials and containers used for packaging. Subsequently, packaging gradually has become a vehicle in which to communicate many of society's norms. Although the dynamism of today's environment may change the superficial facets of packaging's representation, ultimately, basic cultural aspects remain imbedded to influence the essence of the way products are presented. This concept must be honored if companies wish to enter and to become successful in foreign markets.

To illustrate this point, this paper traces the use of packaging in the Mexican Mesoamerican period in order to demonstrate how functionality and aesthetics became intertwined due to the gradual evolution of culture. Arguably, the development of packaging's role in Mesoamerica indicates a form of product branding that is complemented by packaging. The relative isolation of the Náhuatl society has permitted a unique insight into the developmental use of the Náhuatl's containers as they gradually acquired society's characteristics. In effect, the limited contact with other cultures has helped to provide the Mesoamerican container a distinct identity or branding.

Branding is typically the manufacturer's assertion of the product's standardization and quality. To help display these features to the best advantage of the product requires the ingenious use of packaging. This suggests that packaging not only serves as physical protection that enables the producer to maintain control over the contents and product standards, packaging also serves as an expression of identity. In other words, packaging has a dual role; a functional one whose design is appreciated as 'a good idea which benefits me' and an alternate role as an aesthetic design, which addresses a 'decorative design.'

Additionally, this paper suggests that packaging is a form of branding that is composed of three facets of communication: functional (information), aesthetic (ego) and culture. Arguably, packaging's functional and aesthetic character cannot be separated because they reflect the life and spirit of the people. The life and spirit of the people is derived from the culture. This inseparability is the essence of the brand. However, an interesting point to make is that the Mexican Mesoamerican people never truly considered their containers to be more than functional or aesthetic. They were designed to fulfill the necessities of daily life and bestow some artistic discrimination. In essence, the cultural identity that was imparted to the containers was an unconscious, yet by product of society.

The remainder of the paper, traces briefly summarizes how containers were utilized in society in the home, in the market and distribution areas and finally in the social/economic environment.

GEOGRAPHIC SITUATION

Mesoamerica includes the territory that extends from the center of Mexico to present day Honduras and Nicaragua in Central America. Mesoamerica included many different cultures, such as the Mayans. These subcultures were actually descendants from one society. Subsequently, the people inhabiting this region possessed several common characteristics. Among these characteristics was the approach to agriculture and the use of the hoe, the echeloned pyramid, some religious features, hieroglyphic writing calendar. The people also enjoyed many scientific advances such as astronomy and mathematics. Noteworthy is the importance the practice of herbal medicine was to the people. The practice not only brought about many cures to diseases, those that practiced herbal medicine were also entrusted with spreading knowledge. As societal knowledge spread through lore, it began to incorporate religious aspects, which were then reflected in the many different crafts society produced. At this time, craftsmen began to produce ceramics for their own societies as well as for villages outside. More important, the people began to develop more formal societies, which helped to support their burgeoning commercial markets to eventually unite the Mesoamerican territory.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION

The foundation of the economy was a structure formed by two fundamental classes: the noble (pipiltin), who formed the material means of production, the plebeian (macehualtin), who were the class of the politically dependent worker. They also economically represented the nobility. It is necessary to understand that land belonged to the prominent members of the society, although all taxes were paid by the less privileged people who lived in the outlying areas. Taxes were also collected from foreign merchants. The most important factor in the economic organization of the Mexican territory is the fact that the economy was directed and regulated by the political organization.

Certain specialties such as carpenters, stonecutters, bricklayers, potters, basket makers and tanners existed among the craftsmen. Most of the products these specialists produced were for their own consumption. However, the high quality and elegant crafts made by goldsmiths, feather workers, sculptors and painters, were reserved for the nobles in the palaces.

Each family manufactured the tools they would need to function in daily life. They made ceramic articles, small representations of their gods, stone objects (e.g., knives and axes), spun fabric and even constructed material to use to build their homes.

Any peasant could make the container that their family needed, which depended upon the availability of the material as well as the particular skills of the peasant. However, to fully develop excellent workmanship required that the person be dedicated full time to the particular craft. It required that the person acquire specialized knowledge and skill, which could only be accumulated through experience. Gaining this experience was facilitated by the fact that the craftsmen were paid to produce these items, either through their own abilities to sell the object or through the employment of a sponsor. Many craftsmen owned land on which they had to work, therefore, they were devoted to the crafts only part time. In contrast to the small family craftsmen, more formal existed to manufacture ceramics. These larger systems consisted of small groups of peasants or peasant villages (communes) that cultivated the land.

Initially, the excess taxes were due to the local population's contribution, which was under the political sovereignty of one entity. In other words, all production was from one governed source; the society that belonged to the political center. But the greater amount of goods came from outlying areas that were not under the direct supervision of one political center.

Over time, the accumulation of goods necessitated the establishment of an organization of officials to monitor the collection, recording, transportation, and distribution. Additionally, these officials were in charge of storing and protecting these goods. Eventually, they had to build separate and diverse storage facilities. In this period, society was practicing the characteristics of sorting (the accumulation, storage, and distribution of materials). Having solved their basic problems with subsistence, the Mexicas (or Mesoamericans) could then travel to increase their consumption of complementary goods, which necessitated the need for containers and packages that could resist the wear from travel.

Essentially, the above provided a brief summary of the early origins that helped to shape the development of packaging. Societal necessities were established from the basic organization of society. Political circumstances guided much of the cultural development. Politics built an economic foundation to sustain two social groups--those that owned the land and those that did not. This artificial separation of society led to the development of different value systems and needs. The nobles were more oriented toward incorporating both function and design as they viewed design as a status symbol. On the other hand, the landless truly could not enjoy or appreciate the aesthetics of their art, relative to the nobles. Consequently, the "common people" viewed packages and containers as items that fulfilled a functional role. Nonetheless, these aspects of society became part of packaging that was supported by the underlying structure of culture as the various artisans inherently contributed their knowledge and experiences to the shaping of both the functionality and aesthetics of packaging.

THE MARKET OF TLATELOLCO

Market exchange was one of the principal precursors to the changes that occurred in the Mesoamerican society. In Tenochtitlan, for instance, many of the basic agriculture and domestic animal products were inherent to the region, yet many of the items related to fabrics, building materials, and ceramics were nonexistent.² In order to compensate for their material shortcomings, the Mexicas initiated exchange with other villages. Over time, society's gradual development and consumption growth increased the potential for establishing lucrative commercial ties with distant regions.

The Aztec's economic system reflected a relatively advanced state. This system required that the merchants travel between different villages buying and selling on a regular schedule. Exchange transactions conducted in this way led to the establishment of a regular market, much like a modern day traveling flea market. These merchants organized caravans to carry various goods throughout the villages on regular bases—they were essentially traveling salesmen.

At least 69 different product categories were created to address society's needs, among them were specialists in gold trade and other precious metals, cocoa, corn, animals, and even paper. The types of merchants included high-ranking merchants (specialty goods), slave merchants, and commodity goods merchants. The greatest part of exchange was facilitated through barter in some markets although some commercial transactions were carried out through currency. The currency was in the form of cocoa or cotton blankets as well as tubes that contained gold powder or some precious stones (e.g., jade).

Generally, open markets were located near the residences of the rulers and were organized carefully in order to separate the goods in different areas. The products were separated by class and function. For example, sections were devoted to nutritional products such as corn, which were sold in several different forms (e.g., white corn and yellow corn), while other sections were dedicated to wood products. However, since this was a general market, each vendor family that sold corn was required to sell their goods alongside many other families in the same area. The problem that surfaced was how to effectively differentiate one family's product from the other?

Thus, packaging began to take on a new role--attracting the attention of potential consumers. As indicated earlier, the gradual development of society led to a splintering of social groups into nobles and workers. This division also led to various kinds of packaging that was needed to protect the product as well as display the aesthetic qualities of the product itself. Packaging's functions, therefore, changed due to the different lifestyles and their expectations. Additionally, the Mesoamerican society began to separate the functionality of the packaging according to market needs.

COMMODITY DISTRIBUTION

Mexico City's product supply system depended upon the commercial exchange with the villages that surrounded the city. It also depended upon the city's efficiency with tax collection. An important factor that supported external supply was the organization of the transportation system, which facilitated the long distance trade. This system was formed by professional loaders that offered their work in the market as local hires or alternatively, they were contracted out to accompany merchants on long-distance trips.

Packaging's design became vital as a transporting vessel. Corn and other grains were loaded in baskets made of fibers (chiquihuites). The basket's mouth was much wider than the base so that the loaders could carry the basket on their backs. For instance, if the product was honey, it was carried in vases or long cylindrical tubes. If they carried perishable or fragile products, they were transported in wooden boxes (cacaxtle). To transport products that had to be protected from the weather, the carriers used boxes made of cane and leather (petlacalli). Potable water was carried in a large mud vase with three handles.

² Castillo, Victor (1984), "Estructura Económica de la Sociedad Mexicana Según Fuentes Documentales," México, UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, p. 93.

Additionally, liquid was transported through the inventive use of a large vase made from leather. It was also common to use leather from lamb, which was sewn together to form an airtight container. All of these containers were designed to be carried on the loader's back. They therefore incorporated physical attributes that considered the product's characteristics and the carrier's.

The road and water systems that were used for transportation were also important factors that influenced the types of containers. The maintenance of these transportation systems was important to sustaining commercial activity. In particular, the waterways contributed much to goods transportation because it was often faster and much better suited to carry large, heavy and bulky products. The main route for transporting goods was between Mexico City and Tenochtitlan. Tenochtitlan became the commercial center where the outlying villages went to for commercial exchange. Canoes were utilized to transport large goods (e.g., wood, stone products). Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco became market centers due to the development of good waterway transportation routes that were formed by chinarnpas or cane fences. These fences were natural and helped to shape the waterways.

The containers that were used were primarily palm leaves. These were used to keep the perishable products, such as grain, from spoiling during the trip. Carpeting was also a product that was transported to outlying regions for sale. Interestingly, carpets served many purposes beyond their use as seats and bedding. Besides their utilization as a wrap for perishable goods, they were also used as measures of product quantity. They indicated the quantity of various products (e.g., cocoa, cotton, chili) by the number of bundles of the mat. Clearly, packaging expanded its role as a transportation vessel.

THE KITCHEN

The center of the household was the kitchen. The main feature in the kitchen was a hollow pit, which contained the fire. Called *tlecuilo* or *tenamaztli* in Náhuatl, this area was considered sacred, since it was believed that there resided the mysterious force of the fire.

The greatest innovation that extended the consumption of the tortilla, among the indigenous societies was the *comal*.³ The *comal* was also instrumental because it contributed to the institutionalization of corn preparation for Mexican culture. The *comal* is a circular, extremely flat surface that was used for cooking tamales. The base of the *comal* is rugged so as to permit a uniform distribution of heat. Besides the *comal*, the people developed the *tlatoyos* and the *gorditas*, which were different types of food that directly stemmed from the invention of the *comal*. Since the *comal* allowed the mixture of corn with beans and vegetables, its design helped to create other dishes. Food preparation was facilitated by large mud pots, which were woven baskets made of ditch reed. These baskets were also used to preserve the tortillas' temperature. Different sized baskets were used to store grain and corn. Other interesting vessels that were used as cooking utensils included animal shells (e.g., armadillos and tortoises). Preserving potable water called for large earthen jars of cooked mud that was buried in the floor.

Corn became, and remains, an integral part of the Mexican society. For example, the corn tortilla is a dietary staple that permeates every part of society. As alluded to earlier, nobles and peasants approached corn tortilla purchase, preparation and consumption differently. For example, the wrapping of the tortilla, the way it was prepared and stored indicated the level of privilege the family enjoyed. The packaging for the tortillas were even used according to the wealth of the person; "commoners" carried their tortillas in bags that were designed to be used as storage and plates. On the other hand, the wealthy benefited from having many different types of saucers and plates from which to eat. Briefly, the wealthy prehispanic kitchen was distinguished by its presentation and colorful saucers.

³ Solis, Felipe (1998), "La Cultura del Maiz", México, Clio, p. 18.

CONCLUSION

The work of the Mesoamerican craftsmen was an art that invoked the spirit and called for religious magic. Through their craft, the Mexicas satisfied their need for communication between divine and human powers, which in turn gave them personal symbols reflecting ownership, safety and pride. The presence of war, human sacrifices and demanding education also invoked some of the aesthetic traditions that would be imbedded in the craftsman's product.⁴ In this sense, packaging's role has remained the same. Packaging serves a functional and aesthetic role as it communicates the quality of the product. Yet, these are relatively superficial ways of communicating with the consumer (Vidales 1998). Ultimately, the underlying structure is culture, which gives form and meaning to function and aesthetics.

The design of the package is recognized in different parts of the world for its uniqueness or its association with a certain society. In the consumption societies, packaging's design is a way to communicate and motivate the consumer to purchase the product. Thus, the package itself is a form of advertising. For example, often the consumer will purchase the product, not so much for its functionality, but rather for its aesthetic design and the perception of quality and good taste that it reflects upon the purchaser. The package, then, has many roles that are integrated.

The design of the package in Mexico is based on three important areas

1. International companies must adhere to the local customs regarding packaging while maintaining the integrity of the product. The package designer must therefore make adjustments to the packaging's design to fit local standards.
2. In Mexico, national companies are faced with increasing competition. In order to stand out, Mexican packages must possess great creativity in both design and functionality in order to fulfill the requirements by both domestic and international markets.
3. Products with traditional packaging from regional areas still exist and are being produced to meet daily needs. These packages or containers still maintain creativity in both design and function

Against this background, there is increased attention to packaging as a marketing tool. Due to the dynamics of globalization, Mexico is no longer isolated and must attract not only local and domestic customers; she must also be able to attract foreign market consumers. One advantage that Mexico has is the fact that her packaging designs, which carry pre-Hispanic elements, is becoming recognized at an international level.

This scenario implies the importance of management practices in marketing across international borders or cultures. The debate over standardization vs. adaptation, argued for several decades, has reemerged (Agarwal 1995, Dyer and Song 1997). Some academics assert that cultures and values are converging (Misawa 1987), while others believe that cultures are actually diverging (Morris and Pavett 1992). The former argument is that technology and globalization lead to standardization of cultures and therefore marketing practices should be similar across cultures'. The latter maintain the view that despite the apparent standardization of products, cultures are resistant to change and cultures would therefore react differently to these same products (Hofstede 1980). Consequently, this paper suggests that the underlying historical cultural contribution should be included in the understanding of packaging products. Although packaging may appear to be a superficial component, it is a form of communication whose elements include the foundation of culture that supports the functionality and aesthetics of the package. Traditions are transmitted through culture, which ultimately is reflected in the packaging.

⁴ Mohar Betancourt, Luz Maria (1997), "Manos Artesanas del Antiguo", México, SEP-CONACYT, p. 54.

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