



## JAPAN: Japan leads the way in packaging innovation

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**Japan's obsession with detail has led to one of the most advanced packaging cultures in the world. Innovation and consumer attitudes are high on the agenda, a lesson food companies of the West would do well to learn, Michael Fitzpatrick believes.**

"The first bite is with the eye," they say in Japan, referring to the nation's near obsession with the look of food and its presentation. Unsurprisingly, food packaging too comes in for a great deal more scrutiny here than it receives in the West.

Japanese consumers are the most demanding in the world, so packaging standards are high, says Neil Kozarsky, Japanese packaging expert and CEO of the US-based packaging consultancy Technical Help in Engineering and Marketing (THEM). Indeed such is Japan's leadership in this field, that it pays to watch this market closely.

"Marketers and packaging professionals in Japan have different priorities; above all they must convince arguably the planet's most demanding consumers that no detail has been ignored and the quality of the final presentation is unsurpassed. The Japanese use essentially the same materials to package their food and beverage products as we do (paper, metal plastic, foam, foil, glass and wood); the chief difference is every product has to look perfect and function flawlessly," Kozarsky says.

Also, any food products launched in Japan have to be attuned to the preferences of Japanese consumers, who place a higher value on colour and eye-catching appearance. Legions of would-be exporters to Japan have a great product, Kozarsky says, but fail because of poor packaging.

"It's a fact that foreign exports to Japan frequently fail because the product or package doesn't measure up to the incredibly high Japanese standards. Any mark or registration issue on the primary or secondary package is unacceptable. If the outer package is clear, another frequent problem is imperfection (even seemingly minute) of the primary pack. This could take the form of a foil-wrapped confectionery item becoming partially unwrapped. Or, if a shaped product becomes slightly damaged (a tip breaks off a triangular unit), it will catch the attention of the consumer and be rejected," he says.

Not only must packaging meet these tough requirements he says, but they also need to be creatively presented. Successful packaging is often quickly copied in Japan by the competition, proof, Kozarsky believes, of the competitive edge good packaging can achieve in this market.

Beverage maker Kirin found it had a huge hit on its hands with a convention-busting white can for its Fire White Coffee. Kirin employed an all-women team to develop the Fire White Coffee brand. The move to package the product in a white can ran against the conventional wisdom of the marketplace that sees nearly all canned coffee cans sold in dark colours.

But other coffee makers soon followed suit, when it became apparent that Kirin's bold packaging move had achieved what no other canned coffee maker had done - attract droves of female customers. Its stylish bottle-shaped can, with a wide neck that emphasises the colour white, has boosted female consumption to record levels. Women now account for 40% of the market for canned coffee.

"Japan remains a source of innovation and successful management practices but its relationship with consumer packaging is special. Japanese packaging has an advanced packaging culture both in the marketplace and technically, and applies consumer packaging

as a special marketing tool of commerce," says Kozarsky.

The result is that Japanese food groups are often willing to spend more on packaging than their Western counterpart.

"The Japanese unquestionably spend more on packaging (per capita) than EU and US," says Kozarsky.

For example, the film used in packaging is almost always rotogravure printed, whereas cheaper flexographic presses usually suffice in the West. Furthermore, both flexible and rigid containers employ heavier gauge materials, all in an effort to convey quality.

"As environmentally conscious as space-starved Japan really is, the last place brand owners or packagers can look to source reduce is in the look and feel of a container. Thin or flimsy is synonymous with 'cheap', which is a fast track to failure in that part of the world. Even transparent films and containers, widely used in food packaging for many important product categories (sushi, rice, sandwiches, fruit, etc.), are held to a higher standard of clarity because consumers demand a clear view of what they are contemplating purchasing," says Kozarsky.

Kozarsky acknowledges that US and EU counterparts may not have the same budget for equivalent products, but points out that much can be gleaned from the process of better understanding exactly how a consumer interacts with a product by watching the Japanese way. Food packagers and marketers can learn a great deal from Japan, he explains.

"Japanese products and packaging have to literally delight consumers. This means that every aspect of a product usage occasion has to be carefully thought through and responded to. If there are five components of a given product (bottle, label, closure, liner, food or beverage itself), it pays to figure out which one is most important for the given application and to perhaps spend a little more to give the consumer a little "wink" or "hug" as a means to differentiate from the competition. It's all about allowing indulgence experiences as opposed to mere consumption of products."

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