



As demanding as the convenience-store environment is in Japan, this small package breaks through with innovative presentation, shape differentiation, and a distinguishing color palette.

# Japanese Culture in Packaging

DESIGNERS DELIGHT IN THE DETAILS  
WHILE SAVING CONSUMERS' TIME



BY NEIL KOZARSKY AND RON ROMANIK

Successful packaging mirrors culture and lifestyle. Nowhere is this more true and important than in Japan. The Japanese people pride themselves on being efficient, but it is even deeper than that. The reputation of Japan's subway and train system speaks for itself, but each member of Japanese society carries a responsibility not to disturb the harmony, or "wa," of any other individual.

In Japan, there is tremendous pride taken from this high level of efficiency and attention to detail. The other side of this equation is that people feel shame if they do not fulfill this societal value. The end result of this attention to consumer expectations is a package that delights consumers.

## THE MANY FACETS OF TIME

The Japanese cultural imperative to avoid time-wasting is manifest in Japanese packaging in a number of

ways. Brilliant graphics are the norm in Japan, for saving time as much as any other reason. Vibrant images of products strongly convey value and appeal, and it is simply unacceptable to force consumers to waste time looking repeatedly for key descriptive elements concerning a product.

Retail packages in Japan quickly and clearly communicate the purpose and benefits of a product with strong and direct messages. In addition, Japanese package designers are pressed to produce packages that are intuitive for consumers to use to avoid wasting their time. Japanese packages often have wide notches with graphic cues alerting consumers where and how to initiate opening a package.

Tamper-evident seals are frequently highlighted with printing to show the Japanese consumer where the perforation line is. This may only save a fraction of a second for the

Japanese consumer, but it is part of a cultural "promise" between producer and consumer not to waste any time. A Japanese carmaker, for example, was the first to put an incandescent ring around the car ignition to eliminate the waste of time and the aggravation a driver experiences when trying finding a key hole in a dark automobile.

One facet that illuminates Japanese packaging's role in not wasting consumers' time is the increasing popularity of convenience stores in Japan. The shelf space in these stores is so efficiently used that a 7/11-sized store in Tokyo stocks all the essentials yet still has space for just about any business services that a shopper might need. And convenience store personnel are highly trained to move at the speed of a Shinkansen Bullet Train in order to not waste any customer's time. After all, as a Japanese man recently phrased it: "If you have to wait for a clerk, it's no longer a convenient store."

Transparent packaging for many food products also allows Japanese consumers to save time by quickly determining the freshness of a given product. The goal is to show the consumer the bright colors of the fresh fish, produce, or meat and let them confirm the freshness of the product for themselves. This saves the consumer the annoying time wasted searching for a minuscule date code or “best-if-used-by” mark.

### ATTENTION TO GRAPHIC DETAIL

Japanese consumers look at packaged goods much the way doctors conduct examinations on people or evaluate injuries—they usually look for and see more than their U.S. counterparts. Expectations for packaging graphics in Japan are significantly higher than what U.S. consumers find acceptable. In Japan, any hint of marks, splotches, hickeys, dirt, registration errors, or print quality compromises are grounds for immediate package and product rejection.

As a result, flexible film converters in Japan are forced to invest in sophisticated optical systems designed specifically to detect even the smallest graphic flaw. When such a defect is identified, fully automated equipment is used to “stop the press,” remove the problematic web, and then resume production. How much does this cost? Is it really worth it? These questions are not even dignified with a response in Japan because the answer is simple: No one willfully accepts a less-than-perfect package.

Even children in Japan can be seen carefully evaluating the quality of a product’s overall packaging presentation. And it seems U.S. packaging and marketing professionals have heard the stories about many companies simply giving up on trying to export packaged products to the Japanese market.



In Japan, attention to detail does not mean only the outer surface graphics. For example, a confectionery concern had to stop marketing one of its flagship products in Japan because the foil wrapper occasionally failed to cover 100% of the candy and the tip of the product was sometimes damaged. In the U.S., these same issues were essentially non-issues; in Japan, they were deal-breakers.

Furthermore, Japanese consumers expect package contents to precisely

match label claims. That sounds no different than the U.S., but it is. In Japan, for instance, a product being overweight is as much of a cause for rejection as if it were underweight. Weight variations are a frequent compromise by many manufacturers to keep production lines running efficiently and avoid “unders.” Japanese expectations of the mastery of detail ask that manufacturers do not try to cover up production imperfections by offering consumers more of a product.

Japanese packaging producers are held to a high standard of quality in graphic presentation and shelf presence. The Pocky brand earned its high place of respect by meeting and exceeding those standards.

### A NO-TOUCH POLICY

Japanese consumers closely evaluate fruits, vegetables, and meats. The wrong color, a bruise, or even the hint of an imperfection will cause a shelf item to be passed over. Apples and pears are merchandised with a thin expandable polystyrene (EPS) wrap to reinforce the principle of cleanliness and purity. This scrutiny of consumer goods is not limited to food and beverage items. Japanese shoppers will not purchase a magazine if there is a fold in the cover or any inner page. They also will rarely purchase the first—or last—item on a rack or shelf. This is because they do not want to buy something that has undoubtedly been touched or handled already.

The first event of a newborn’s life in Japan is an immediate bath. Japanese children learn from early on in their lives that cleanliness is Godliness. Everything encountered in life and society falls under this standard. So any goods not meeting a

standard are called “kitanai,” which translates as dirty or disgusting.

Currency transactions in Japanese stores typically require the use of a tray so people’s hands do not have to come into direct contact, and the money gets to have an intermediate step before being transferred. Another example is Negiri sushi (thin seaweed

rolled around rice with vegetables or fish), a very popular traditional food in Japan. Negiri is often packaged in film designed so the top of the package can be removed while still allowing the film to remain on the bottom so the consumer does not have to touch the food.

This explains why the Japanese

customarily wash their hands with warm wet towels before they eat. And even then, they prefer to not have any food item come in direct contact with their hands. It is fascinating for foreigners to watch the Japanese eat fast food such as hamburgers or hoagies. They almost always use paper wraps that are designed to keep the servers’ and the users’ fingers completely off of the food.

When all of these details are mastered, and the right product is presented to the consumer when and where they can best shop it, this is referred to as a Time, Place, and Occasion (TPO) marketing strategy. The overwhelming essence of merchandising in Japan stems from TPO. Every product on the convenience store shelf, for instance, solves an obvious problem for the consumer. On top of that, the package is often sized appropriately for the mobile use-occasion experience.

In the U.S., products sold in convenience stores tend to look like miniature versions of larger-sized versions of the same thing that are offered in Club Stores. TPO in Japan means that consumer delight and brand loyalty is but a logical formality when the right problem is solved at the right time with a well-thought-out package. ■

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*This article is part one of a two-part report on packaging trends in Japan. Part two will appear in the January/February 2007 issue.*

## NEW PACKAGING CONCEPT FOR CURRY ROUX



Japanese package designers strive mightily to fully analyze and anticipate consumers’ needs, wants, and desires in a given “use-occasion.” They repeatedly ask key questions of every new package design. Where will the package be utilized primarily? Will one or two hands be available? Is the primary application in a train, in a car, on-the-go, at home, at night, in a shower, etc.? Should the product or package be gender specific? Where will the package be stored?



The Prime Curry Roux product won a Packaging Idea Award in the 2006 Japan Packaging Contest, organized by the Japan Packaging Institute. The recognition for the Prime package was shared between House Foods Corporation, Yamato Esulon Co. Ltd. and Dai Nippon Printing Co. Ltd. (DNP).

The package is an example of how House Foods and DNP focus strongly on consumer usability in every detail. The companies use their respective strengths in striving to develop new packages that satisfy customer demands—even before customers know their own needs or demands. The Prime package design functions well on a number of levels such as intuitive opening mechanism, carton form, portion control packaging, tray shape, neatness in peeling, easy dispensing, and storage efficiency.



The carton’s full-top opening design enables the consumer to remove the inner trays easily. Each single-portion roux is hermetically packaged in its own thermoformed compartment. The compartments separate easily from the others in the five-portion, perforated tray. The rounded shape fits well in the consumer’s palm, and is easy to handle and open.



After using five portions of roux (or half the contents of the carton), the consumer can fold in the sides and downsize the outer carton neatly. Special folds, perforations, and scores make this operation simple and neat. By U.S. standards, this might seem an almost ridiculous concern for space, but saving space is a constant concern for everyday life in Japan, and space conservation as a virtue is valued very highly in Japanese culture.