Gumnut cracks open the business case for accessibility

In a tough business environment, innovation through 'accessible' packaging is giving manufacturers the opportunity to escape from price-dominated competition. Samantha Schelling explains how one family-owned company, Eatwell Foods, has opened up new markets, and retained existing ones, by promoting packaging accessibility.

IN today's competitive market, price is a major criterion on which manufacturers compete – particularly as private labels increase their market share. The companies that survive, or even thrive, in tough times are the innovators.

In Australia, a handful of companies are doing just that with packaging.

"Accessible" packaging (as it's known here) is a guiding tenet of the Australian Packaging Covenant. According to the covenant, a product is not "fit for purpose" unless it is accessible – which is one of the principles of sustainable packaging.

Accessible packaging is defined as being easy to open, having legible labelling, and not compromised in terms of safety or quality.

Packaging accessibility has come into the spotlight in recent years due to increasing noise around "packaging rage" or "wrap rage" – the coined terms for the anger consumers feel when they can't open packaging – and an ageing population.

Changing demographics also means the commercial opportunity for companies to innovate with accessible packaging is huge.

In Australia, more than seven million are now aged over 50. Add that to the 6.4 million people with arthritis or a disability and the 11.7 million with eyesight problems, and that's one in two consumers who face at least one difficulty opening packaging.

BUSINESS IMPACT

One local company that's used accessibility to achieve commercial advantage is Eatwell Foods. This medium-sized, family-owned Victorian manufacturer supplies Gumnut branded biscuits that are served in NSW public hospitals and sold in other markets.

The biscuits are in a clear plastic packet that is 104mm tall, 65mm wide, and 19mm deep. In the original packaging, if the hard-to-see serrations weren't torn at the right spot, the pack could be very difficult to open (needing a force between nine and 27 Newtons, but still around 4.5N if torn in the right spot).

With testing on a recently developed benchmark for accessibility – the Initial Scientific Review (ISR) tool (see adjacent box) – Gumnut packaging had an unimpressive accessibility score of +2, meaning it "may require additional time or effort for most consumers with limited functional abilities".

Changes to the Gumnut biscuit packaging included a very obvious "tear here" label and the force required to open the pack was also lowered to a minimal 1.5N, while tearing it open anywhere else or pulling it apart at the seam now requires less than 13N.

The edges of the plastic bag are also now textured to help consumers grip it properly. Label changes as suggested by the ISR also make the labelling easier to read.

Arthritis Australia's strategic partnerships manager, Fergal Barry, says the packaging tweaks achieved a giant leap in terms of accesibility.

"The Accessibility Benchmarking Scale on the new packaging jumped up to +8, meaning 'the product is universally easy to use; 95 per cent of the population will find all tasks associated with using the product easy to perform without the use of tools'," he says.

ABOVE: Matthew McAlpin says the packaging changes to Gumnut biscuits have given Eatwell Foods a tool to help sell their product and given significant benefits to their customers.

LEFT: Hard to open packaging is becoming an increasing source of frustration, dubbed "wrap rage" for a growing number of Australians.

TOOL SETS THE SCORE FOR OPENABILITY

JUDGING packaging accessibility is far from being a subjective, "that's hard to open" test.

A group of organisations has developed the initial scientific review (ISR) report that assesses products and allows organisations to compare suppliers using an accessibility benchmarking scale.

Arthritis Australia was part of the consortium that developed the ISR; others include Nestlé, NSW Health and Georgia Tech, one of the world's leading public research universities.

Fergal Barry, Arthritis Australia's strategic partnerships manager, says the +8 to -8 rating gives a standard method to compare products' ease of opening and legibility.

"The ISR estimates the percentage of consumers who can safely open packaging," Barry says. "It's highly predictive of how patients and consumers will interact with food packaging and has been validated in a health study conducted in a NSW hospital."

A +8 means 95 per cent of the population can easily open the packaging and a -8 means that less than 60 per cent can safely open the packaging.

"In this way, an organisation can compare two competing brands of a similar product, or a manufacturer can compare two design solutions for a product," Barry says.

The ISR combines three aspects to form the benchmarking score: the populations affected, the requirement for a tool, and task criticality.

"That means the elderly and frail don't need to use something dangerous like scissors or a knife to get the biscuits. It also means they don't need to go without because they couldn't open it. The impact here on nutrition is high."

BENEFITS BEAT OUT PRICE

Eatwell Foods' managing director, Matthew McAlpin, says the changes have given his company a tool to help sell their product with significant customer benefits.

"It's offering them a benefit instead of a price-driven alternative. Most customers choose on price, but the ISR shows a clear benefit, that has nothing to do with price. This has given us a lever for some customers who have been difficult to swing over," he says.

So far, McAlpin says the changes have seen Gumnut biscuits retain market share in NSW healthcare organisations and increase market share with other health authorities.

"I didn't necessarily expect to see either of those, so the changes have definitely been worth doing," he says.

"Because we did the job on the biscuits, HealthShare NSW approached us to sort out another type of food packaging, which allowed us to enter a new market."

As far as costs go, packaging changes include design and testing costs, as well as capital equipment to run the new packaging lines. McAlpin says the costs aren't small, but have definitely been worth it.

"You can have the best product, but if you can't open it, it is no good. A lot of food-stuff in healthcare gets thrown out, even if it's not opened.

"The whole programme has introduced us to other products; this has seen increased sales, and benefited our business generally – and we're still improving as we go along."

McAlpin says while some customers have been very proactive in embracing accessibility, "others are taking a while because it's a whole new way of thinking".

MARKET ADVANTAGES

Arthritis Australia's Fergal Barry says, "Gumnut is a small company that has given itself an enormous commercial advantage – for minimal cost. The pack dimensions are the same and the changes needed in manufacturing were low cost, yet resulted in significant differences to the usability of the end product."

Barry says on top of the ISR, Arthritis Australia tested the redesigned Gumnut packaging using another accessibility measurement tool, the Ease of Use Program (EOU, see breakout box) in a NSW hospital.

"We collected some qualitative comments when we did the EOU accreditation. A typical comment was along the lines of, 'I couldn't believe it – I was going to show you how I couldn't open it!'."

Barry says adopting accessible packaging design gives manufacturers a competitive advantage by guiding them on improving their packaging.

Indeed, Barry says, not taking action, especially when your competition is innovating, is fast becoming a sure-fire way to lose business opportunities. ■

EASE OF USE PROGRAM

ARTHRITIS Australia established the Ease of Use (EOU) program in conjunction with Arthritis New Zealand.

EOU accreditation is given to user-friendly products and packaging to allow consumers, government and retailers to select products that better meet their needs.

"Trans-Tasman manufacturers who've designed an easy-to-use product use this accreditation 'tick' in their marketing as another way to reach their target market," Arthritis Australia's strategic partnerships manager, Fergal Barry, says.

"It's a good commercial advantage for them. Independent research has shown consumers trust those products as being independently verified as easy to use.

"We offer these testing services for companies, and work with them to improve their product's accessibility. So far, we've done this with more than 200 products or pieces of packaging from nearly 50 companies."

For more information, visit the www.arthritisaustralia.com.au site.

ABOVE: Many traditional forms of packaging are almost impossible for the elderly or those suffering from disabilities such as arthritis, to open.

6.4 million

Australians with arthritis, or a disability, which makes packaging hard to open.

– Source: Arthritis Australia