

A trip to wonderland

Where bag packages unfurl into flowers and chewing gum wrappers behave well mannered. It sounds exaggerated, but a stroll through the huge halls of the food markets in the basements of Japanese department stores – especially those for traditional confectioneries – and you would surely agree: the mere sight of the product packaging there is amazing. Bianca Beuttel reports from Tokyo, Japan.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPLEX SIMPLENESS

Astonishing is the skilful creation of packaging design, for example, the delicate piece of pastel rose colour (figure 1). The figures emerging during its unwrapping resemble origami -- the Japanese paper folding technique -- so it's no wonder that the item finally turns out to be folded from a square foil.

From a simple shaped piece of material to a complex structure – the same concept applies also to furoshiki, a traditional Japanese wrapping technique using a square piece of cloth to wrap and carry items of various shapes and sizes.

It has inspired Kenji Ekuan (founder of GK Design and author of the book *The Aesthetics of the Japanese Lunchbox*), to coin the term 'furoshikibility'. The term is used to characterise a Japanese design principle: inventing various modifications of a simple tool or technique in order to adapt it for as many different forms of usage as possible – complexity created by simplicity or 'complex simpleness'.

To pursue this thought, you could also describe it as 'reconciling the contradictions'. How else would you explain packaging with a handcrafted feel, which is actually a standardised bag package?

Bag packaging is an efficient method of food packing – as common as it looks. However, only a little adjustment is



required to change its shape and you hardly recognise it anymore. By leaving one end of the bag amply longer, folding it, placing a fastener between the layers, and then by tying the fastener towards the back it will change shape entirely (figure 2).

Fasteners in the shape of leaves or petals, forming an Iris flower, a Persimmon fruit or a peach, (figure 3) often modify this structure.

There are also other modifications of the bag package such as Morning Glory (figure 4), where one end of the bag is printed with bright glossy paint and left unsealed. This end is then tied with a leaf-decorated fastener and unfurled into the shape of the flower.

01. Applied Origami package of a traditional Japanese confectionery – folded from a square piece of foil.

02. How to change the shape of a bag package? A look at the back of this package of a traditional Japanese sweet provides a clue.

03. Modified bag package of a peach fruit containing a traditional Japanese sweet.

04. Modified bag package of Morning Glory flower.

05. Bags like cute dolls celebrate Japanese Girls' Festival.

06. Habanero's challenging look: Can you stand these chips flavoured with the world's hottest pepper?

07. Instantly graspable product message: Capsela vitamin drink bottled like a capsule pill.



STORYTELLERS ON THE RETAIL SHELF

The Morning Glory is a characteristic flower in midsummer; more prominent are the cherry blossoms in spring or the red maple leaves in autumn. These allusions to nature play a key role in Japanese aesthetics and are the initial sparks that trigger the imagination and evoke the atmosphere of the season.

This applies not only to fancy foods and premium gifts – primarily purchased to maintain relationships. You can also find story-evoking products at the convenience store. It never gets boring with all the newly launched products and limited editions.

Sweet snack Caramel Corn is a great example: two eyes and a smile and the entire package has become a cute character. Besides the regular designs, the limited editions feature the characteristic elements of festivals and holidays celebrated throughout the year in Japan.

le, the ones launched for the Girls' Festival (figure 5) are dressed like the dolls displayed on that day – a custom to ensure good fortune for the girls of the family. For Christmas, Caramel Corn will dress up like Santa Claus and his reindeer.

Although cute characters are omnipresent in Japan's merchandising – their smile appears on countless packagings – evil also sells. The character of Habanero Chilli Chips -- flavoured with the world's hottest pepper -- reminds one of computer game monsters (figure 6). Can you hear his sardonic laughter? He is challenging the consumers to prove that he or she can stand the heat. And, the next level is always available as Habanero frequently offers special editions, introducing other extra hot chillies from all over the world.



06.

INSTANTLY COMPREHENSIBLE PRODUCT MESSAGE

To recover after such a tough fight, a vitamin boost might be the right cure. Even those who don't understand Japanese can't go wrong with choosing Capsela (figure 7). A bottle that looks like a big vitamin capsule pill must contain a vitamin drink – mainly vitamin C, as indicated by the lemon yellow colour. No further explanation is required.

An eye-catching and comprehensible product is extremely important at the point of purchase, where buying decisions are made instantly and competing products are on the same shelf.

Very appealing is the Refreshing Health and Beauty Tea, a blended tea with herbs, bottled into the so-called Fit Bottle (figure 8). Its slender waist makes it easy to grip – a result of universal design considerations. But the reason for the product's success is not merely its handiness but rather imagination. According to a survey by a Japanese design magazine, the bottle's shape suggests health benefits and also serves as an inspiration to women to watch their waistline.

LIFESTYLE ACCESSORIES

Despite PET-bottles having more narrative shapes, this is no reason to neglect the sleeves.

While Water from the Bottle Gourd is dressed in colourful sleeves with abstract patterns, Simply Design Coffee is of a minimalist design. It's entirely covered by a white sleeve with no ornamentation other than the product's name and small text (figure 10).

Simply Design Coffee evidently shows that beverages, chewing gums and snack foods are broadening the range of accessories that express individual style and personality – in addition to fashion items and mobile gadgets.

Fresh breath is essential to ensure your impression on others is a positive one. A top seller is Men's Scent, a chewing gum flavoured with Rose-Menthol (figure 11). So, what does this product tell us about its consumers' personality and attitude?

The consumer must be a man who considers himself a gentleman, who takes care of his appearance, oh, and he must be romantic and give a rose to his date. Yes, a gentleman is perfectly groomed and well mannered – and so is this package: The first piece is automatically served to you. It is glued in the small end that comes off when the package is torn open. What service! And serves as a quick reminder to politely hold the door open for the lady.

PET-bottles of unique shape are also a great way to attract attention and to communicate the brand values. Due to advanced manufacturing techniques, the bottle design isn't limited by engineering constraints anymore – they can now resemble cut crystal glasses or bamboo vessels.

An extraordinary example is Water from the Bottle Gourd design (figure 9). Traditionally, the bottle gourd was used as a beverage container for on the road. This PET-bottle – with a carrying strap attached to its waist – is not only adopting the shape, but also the entire idea of that custom. Once again, contradictions are reconciled with a touch of tradition for the modern mobile lifestyle. It even goes stylishly with the light summer kimono made of cotton, which has regained popularity among young people in Japan.



- 08. Fitness Tea keeps you fit while its bottle fits your hands.
- 09. Modernised tradition water from the (PET-) bottle gourd.
- 10. Minimalist Simply Design Coffee.
- 11. Be a gentleman: chewing gum Men's Scent with rose menthol.
- 12. Keeps it crispy: Follow these steps to remove the thin foil between rice ball and seaweed properly and the snack is ready to eat.
- 13. White pudding filled into balloons.
- 14. Tofu balloons.



ENJOY THE PROCESS

Although a mass-produced item, the example of Men's Scent illustrates how much attention is put into the details. Each wrapper is a little different: two of them are red, thus creating an aesthetic contrast. Plus many packages offer surprises that unveil during the process of opening, rewarding only those who purchased the product.

Actually, no effort is spared to ensure convenience and enjoyment. An outstanding example is the packaging for onigiri rice-balls wrapped in nori-seaweed: To keep the seaweed paper crispy, a thin foil inside the package separates rice-ball and seaweed. To remove it comfortably packaging engineers have invented a sophisticated tear open mechanism, requiring just three steps (figure 12). The necessary instructions are printed on each package and after unwrapping, the packaging ends up in the dustbin. Admittedly, there is a lot of garbage due to so much packaging so is this where the wonderland-bubble bursts?

Certainly not. Society is aware of the packaging waste problem, and it will be only a matter of time before Japanese packaging design shows its ability to manage this. The task will be to achieve impressive packaging with an eco-conscious use of material.

In the meantime, an example that gives inspiration to approach the objective of packaging material reduction in a more playful manner: balloon packaging. Elastic material is filled with liquids that thicken into solids -- like white pudding (figure 13) or tofu (figure 14) -- and then stretched extensively. The balloons burst when pierced with a toothpick and there is surprisingly little packaging material left. ©

