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ECOMMERCE

Surprise, delight and stay sustainable

Lockdown provides a golden opportunity for ecommerce brands; it's now up to them to ensure their packaging is clean, green and fun to unpack

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The seemingly unstoppable rise of online shopping was firmly established long before the coronavirus pandemic left high streets empty. Of course, ease, price and vast choice are behind its success, but this year, with consumers confined to their homes, online shopping is also driven by necessity.

This is no doubt welcome news for online retailers. But these businesses must now meet a triple challenge when packaging and sending out goods: dealing with spikes in order volumes; proving their sustainability credentials; and, in the face of these pressures, providing the enjoyable unboxing experience that consumers increasingly expect.

Stuffing cardboard boxes, plastic mailing bags and all manner of

foam and bubble wrap into recycling bins is an everyday chore for stay-at-home consumers. For online retailers, fitting more product into less, and more eco-friendly, packaging is therefore a way to save costs, boost customer satisfaction and stand out from other brands.

Innovative ecommerce packaging solutions are emerging in direct response to the pandemic. For example, the closure of pubs and restaurants during lockdown saw alcohol consumption become a strictly at-home activity; cue the launch of wines, cocktails and spirits in slim, recycled plastic bottles, which can slip easily through a letterbox.

What would have been regarded as a novelty product last year now

looks like a space and resource-saving innovation. Coupled with a strong focus on attractive branding, major gift online retailers, including letterbox flower sellers Bloom & Wild and gift company Not On The High Street, quickly made deals with these drinks brands to incorporate letterbox-friendly booze into their own offer. It's an example of how relevant, timely packaging can make the difference between a new brand's success or failure.

However, making ecommerce packaging meet the demands of 2020 and beyond also requires investment in packaging that the customer is unlikely to see. Major ecommerce platforms such as Amazon, for example, typically require businesses to provide

products fully sealed in protective wrapping. This is to prevent contamination, spoiling or tampering while they sit in fulfilment warehouses or depots. Individual polybags – clear bags usually made from virgin plastic – are used to meet this requirement.

Yet failing to use eco-friendly packaging throughout your business's entire supply chain tarnishes a brand's sustainability credentials and risks accusations of greenwashing if consumers find out.

Alongside its biodegradable customer-facing packaging, ecommerce brand OneNine5, which sells reusable travel accessories, this year switched to also using water-soluble polybags to store stock.

The irony, however, is that after years of efforts to reduce plastic use, and with strong public awareness of single-use plastic's environmental impact, perceptions of the material may be shifting as a result of COVID-19.

"People are probably more accepting of plastic this year," says OneNine5's co-founder Alex Stewart. "Plastic packaging, in many cases, is seen as a negative, but there are still also connotations of it keeping things sterile. In a pandemic, people are seeing plastic as keeping things cleaner. In that respect, it does give peace of mind."

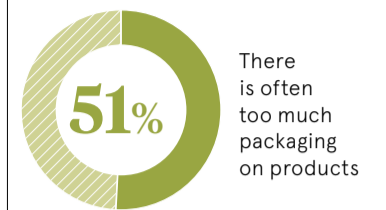
So brands need to make sure they have their sustainability and hygiene bases covered. In addition, for non-essential purchases, many consumers still expect an enjoyable experience when receiving, opening and unwrapping their parcels: the unboxing element online retailers must maintain, and even heighten, to win business in a competitive online market.

The Little Loop, an online business which provides children's clothing for rent, sends out the clothing in sealable, flexible PVC pouches, instead of cardboard boxes or single-use plastic packaging. The customer sends the clothes back in the pouch when the rental period is up. The bags, which are more commonly used by the government as diplomatic bags for sending official documents and items, are guaranteed to withstand being posted 2,000 times.

Founder Charlotte Morley says that while unconventional, the bags are nevertheless durable, flexible and secure ways to send items and don't require foam or void filling. "Our consumers keep the clothing for three months on average. We're potentially only sending these bags out four times a year, which means feasibly our

CUSTOMERS NOT SATISFIED WITH PACKAGING FROM AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Global shoppers who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements



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business could use them for 20 years," she says.

Morley adds that transitioning from the traditional ecommerce cardboard box or envelope brings compromises. "I can't just get rid of that unboxing experience altogether; it is such a key part of branding," she says. "One of the challenges is that the unboxing experience only really works if the customer can open up a box or a lid and it's all laid out perfectly. Because our packaging is soft bags, things do get jostled around inside them."

Brands that choose novel or sustainable packaging methods must therefore find other ways to create a pleasurable unboxing experience. Morley adds: "You have to meet a certain level of consumer expectation. We don't want to completely denigrate the customer experience, even though we're a sustainable company. So we wrap the clothing using sustainably printed, recycled tissue paper and use stickers made with vegetable-based inks instead."

Honing a unique, sustainable ecommerce packaging strategy costs time, money and effort. But brands charting their own path are more likely to make returns from their packaging than those that merely do what is expected of them, says Luc Speisser, chief innovation officer at global brand consultant Landor. His advice for brands is: "You need to do good to be relevant, but do good in your own different and unique way. That's how it becomes a competitive advantage, not just a cost or a race to compliance." ●

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