

How NOT to design Packages!

By Harshwardhan Gupta

I have avoided writing this article in the usual technical writing style in the hope that the sleeping manufacturing majority will wake up and take notice. Though I am a mechanical engineer and a machine- and product designer, I am writing this piece as an average Indian user-consumer.

Today the urban Indian consumer buys more packaged goods than he or she makes loose purchases from the market. To simply open a great majority of packages, one has to bring all of one's creativity, ingenuity and dexterity to bear, because virtually no manufacturer ever gives a thought to how his consumer will open his package. "Oh, isn't it obvious!" No, it's not always obvious how the package is to be opened, nor is it realistic or desirable to assume that the consumer will have the right tools for the right package-opening job at the right place at the right time.

The following list of such situations could fill this whole magazine, but just let me give you a few everyday instances:

- You are inside a bathroom, all wet and trying to open a shampoo sachet.
- You are travelling in a rickshaw, trying to open a mineral water bottle with a shrink-wrapped seal.
- You are with your sick child, trying to open a cough syrup bottle (with an ROPP cap) and the cap goes round and round without the seal breaking.
- You are opening a glass beer bottle with a crown cap and the glass breaks instead of the cap coming out.
- You are sitting with guests trying to open a pack of snacks packed in stretchy LDPE or unbreakable BOPP.
- You are a frail old person trying to open a can or a tin of food with the usual tools.
- You are an average petite Indian woman trying to open a twist-lock cap of a jam jar.
- You are trying to open the heat-sealed foil of a coffee jar – it resists opening with your fingers and if you use a knife, the glass around chips off into fine flakes – you hear the noise of the glass crumbling but cross your fingers and use the expensive coffee.
- You are a young girl trying to open the metal can of a body-talc.
- You are a small kid trying to open a flow-wrapped pack of biscuits, or a gas-filled pack of expanded snacks, or a BOPP pack of popcorn.
- You are one of the millions of traditional Indian housewives trying to open a milk bag without scissors, as in your household it is taboo to bring a pair scissors into the kitchen. Ditto for an edible oil flexi-pouch without a spout.
- You are an ordinary citizen, trying to open a mass-mailing envelope from a big company, which has been closed by glue but before that the letter has been stapled to the envelope.
- You are trying to open a 100s wad of banknotes heavily stapled at multiple places by your friendly neighborhood bank.
- You are trying to open a small flimsy carton that has been sealed by a small length of absolutely unbreakable BOPP tape.
- You are trying to open the water sachets the Railways give you alongside their meal trays.
- You are trying to open a tightly shrink-wrapped toy pack for your child as he or she is excitedly trying to climb all over you.
- You have dressed up for the evening, got guests in the house, trying to open a double-walled pickle pouch and the pickle oil goes all over your dress.
- You get a family or party pack of an ice-cream and try to tear it along those fancy

opening cuts the right way, and instead of opening the pack you just get a strip of cardboard in your hand, because the glue holding the carton together is stronger than the cardboard itself, and has spread below the tear strip also.

- You are trying to open an adhesive tube and follow the instructions to pierce the seal with the cap, and it immediately leaks all over your fingers.
- You are a young mother trying to open a metal can of baby food as your hungry little baby is howling away.

This, and more, has happened to you, hasn't it? How did you feel then? Annoyed? Angry? Frustrated? Helpless? Or just used your teeth as that is one package-opening tool everyone has! Ironically, one of the few packs that open most easily with bare hands are the cigarette packs, injurious to your health anyway!

We Indians take so much pride in our intelligence and ingenuity! For all the garish package graphics, the Indian ingenuity is certainly not evident in our package designs. What is achieved by saying wryly now, that commonsense is not so common? And what is the point of saying, "Our customers must be knowing how to open our packs because we have never received any complaints! What are YOU complaining about? Don't you know we have enough problems handling the government paperwork and managing our dealers? And look at the cut-throat competition?"

These are spurious arguments. Such mindset is a product of the ignorance as well as the arrogance of the Indian manufacturers. But, how will the consumers complain? Except a few who have been to Europe or USA, the vast majority has never seen better, easily openable packages, or even packages with clear opening instructions. The consumers in India have no choice, when it comes to choosing between easy and not-so-easy to open packages. Not to mention the total lack of any regulations in this regard. Being Indians, we are used to suffering in silence, blaming it all on our "taqdeer".

In all fairness, there are a few, very very few, exceptions. Some packs do have sensible and lucid opening instructions, some chocolate and ice-cream bar packs are made to tear open very easily, and some manufacturers do demonstrate how to open and use the product through television ads. But what about the rest?

So much for opening the package! What about the information on the pack and condition of the products inside? A list again?

- A flow-wrapped biscuit pack has several biscuits already broken and chipped inside.
- A toothpaste tube says – "for best results start squeezing from top". Now which is the top, the end from where the toothpaste comes out or the end from where the manufacturer fills it (from the crimp side)?
- A mineral water bottle is filled to the brim to save packaging material so it drenches you as you open it.
- A gas-filled pack of potato wafers contains a good percentage of broken and crushed chips – the gas filling is supposed to prevent this but the processing and packaging machines have already done the damage.
- A blister pack breaks the tablets as you try to take them out.
- A pack of mosquito coils reveals a good number of broken coils, and the sharp stand draws blood from your fingers as you try to erect it.
- The batch number and manufacturing date is absolutely illegible.
- Sitting with your medicine box, you are trying to figure out which is the right medicine as the earlier opening of a few blisters has ripped off the name of the medicine from the pack.
- You are trying to open a sachet that says, "tear here" and it has no notch to tear from, or the notch exists but the material just stretches as you try to open it.

I think I have made my point. Most Indian manufacturers design and make packages with a mindlessness they will never exhibit when

managing the cash flow of the company. To those manufacturers who have taken serious note of this writing, I have this advice – study the packages from developed countries and adopt the materials and closure techniques, rather than just adopting the attractive graphics, and most importantly, get some scientific and thorough market research done by an independent and qualified agency, not by people who will tell you what you want to hear! This is what the multinationals do, and for good reason. So often, the Indian market research is done only on the product and sometimes on the attractiveness of

the package, rarely ever on the easy openability of the pack. As consumer awareness increases, easy-to-open packages will slowly take over the market. Please remember that by providing the consumer with an easy to open package, you are not doing a favour to him, you are just giving him his money's worth, which is his due.

The author is a graduate of IIT Bombay in Mechanical Engineering. He has been designing machines since 1976. He founded Neubauplan Machine Design Studio, an independent consulting machine-design firm in 1981 in Pune. He can be reached at harsh@neubauplan.com or through his website at www.neubauplan.com