

Packaging is the first thing potential drinkers notice about a brand. Simon Meads reports on what the brands are doing to grab our attention.



We often spend so much time analysing what's inside a bottle that we forget that most drinkers are first attracted by the bottle itself. The brand name is a big draw, of course, but the package must live up to the image.

If Smirnoff were sold in bars in three-litre black plastic buckets, the chances are that the image might just lose something. And maintaining a brand image is one of the big limitations on the creativity of designers when it comes to spirit's packaging and design.

When Diageo approached Sedley Place design agency to re-design the Smirnoff red package there was a list of four criteria to be taken into account. First there had to be a continued reference to imperialist Russia, second a look of modernity, third an aspect of establishment, and finally an overall feel of brand dominance.

The designers laid out four separate executions to capture each aspect of the brief and they were amalgamated to create the final look. The crown conjures up the imperialist Russia element; the reduced label

Seriously vodka was conceived to look simple and straightforward and therefore stand out.

and the embossed bottle makes it modern, establishment comes with the prominence of the Smirnoff brand and the Pierre Smirnoff name embossed on the neck of the bottle, and the brand dominance aspect comes from it being big and red. Big and red? Yes, argued the designers, just look at Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Heinz tomato ketchup even.

Having got that far, the next job was to road test it by taking it to the consumers and letting them say what they think of it. "Rather than the research telling us what was wrong, as is normally the case," said Gerry Barney, creative director at Sedley Place, "It told us that everything about the new design was right." Still from getting the brief to releasing the new Smirnoff package in 1999 (rolled out internationally in 2000) took two years.

There are certain things we know will work. Sex sells, but no one has managed to bottle it and stick a label on it (Viagra doesn't count). So the near promise of sex is close enough. You know what FCUK is really saying, but if they actually put that on

a bottle (or t-shirt) it would be oversteering the mark: instead of being risqué, it would just become vulgar.

It's all about creating a point of difference, or rather, a stand-out feature. The red makes the brand instantly recognizable. "It's all about making it eye-catching," says Mark Doherty of consultancy Doherty. "Putting on all the bells and whistles to attract the consumer."

It doesn't have to be a name that says FUCK, however, it could be a frosted bottle for a gin, or a frosted bottle for vodka. But what designers can't afford to forget is that packages still have to convey some information about the nature of the liquid in the bottle, and that's an important consideration – limitation.

"But if you have a limitation, you have to stay within the bounds of that limitation," says Mark, whose team was responsible for creating the package for the Perrier wine brand. Most wine packaging is ultra-traditional, often because it's traditional to convey something of where it comes from while selling a notion of quality. B



1. Compass Box Whisky aims to stand out from other Scotch whiskies. 2. The updated Smirnoff packaging, rolled out in 2000, took two years to get from the brief into bars.

designer argument is: who says I have to do things that way, just because everyone else has done the same? And as for younger people, and crucially younger people, who drink more wine this has become one of the most innovative areas of drinks packaging.

How come wine designers can do anything – and I mean anything – they want, while whisky producers seem to feel a whisky package has to look a certain way? “Do you have certain cues?” said John Glaser, brand manager of Compass Box Whisky. “I saw a package for an Australian wine the other day and on the label there was just a silhouette,” he added by way of explanation.

In the world of spirits doesn't come much more traditional than whisky, or whisky packaging. But again the go-ahead reasoning goes: why can't you do something more modern?

When setting up Compass Box Whisky to create a new style of blended whisky, it was decided that packaging should reflect that. “The starting point was to do something interesting and something arresting

that stands out from the rest of Scotch whisky,” said John. And if your brand doesn't have any history or heritage per se, then you have more latitude to do what you want.

“I wanted something that was contemporary in form and structure, but that was balanced by a visual element that suggested a traditional craft – that's the wood engravings we use that come from circa 1900 illustrated papers.

“It was a loose brief, but I really liked the blend of modernity and tradition,” John added. “Some people love it and it shocks some people. They never thought whisky could look like that.” This is another limitation – you have to know whom you are creating a package for, and tied in with that is knowing where it will be seen.

Certain packages set about mimicking more successful brands in the hope that some of that appeal will rub off. Or they use lots of tags to attract consumers with promises of the quality status. “Research shows that consumers are extremely bored and mistrusting of labels like

‘imported’, ‘premium’ and so forth,” said James Robertson brand manager for Seriously vodka.

Seriously was conceived to look simple and straightforward in its presentation, with the white label designed to look like the beginning of a note or letter. “It was tailored to stand out by being simple. Every bottle it stands next to within the on-trade environment is highly coloured and over-decorated, funny-shaped or something. Just being simple is the best way of standing out,” said James.

While there is a majority of people who need the reliability of a well-packaged brand name, there are plenty of others who are more discerning, more adventurous and more willing to explore. And with the added impetus of the on-trade, drinkers can be more willing to experiment if there is something that catches their eye. “They don't need the same cues as everyone else,” said John.

One thing brands do need, however, particularly in smart environments, is smart execution of the packaging. Once they had decided on the route to take with the Seriously vodka packaging, the brand developers called in Bo Rosander, a typographer to round off the presentation.

It's a direction that more designers are taking. “Everything is becoming cleaner and more simple. And more people are taking the typographic route,” says Doherty. “Less modelled and less confusing, that's the way it seems to be going,” he adds.

Once the package has been developed, designed and done the rounds of market research, it is ready for the shelf. But to anyone who has tried to sniff plastic flowers in a restaurant, or taken a bite out of a wax apple by mistake, looks can be deceiving, and there are aspects that are beyond the designer's skills. As Mark points out: “Good design is good design. But unless you have the product and the support, its not going to work.” **FLJR**