

INDUSTRY ARTICLE

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Label Etiquette. Look! At! Me!

They are vehicles of hype and quiet influencers. They express facts as well as visions. They need to do a lot, but they can still do a lot more. The value of a good label is actually hard to overestimate.

Bar code, best before date, nutritional information table. Quantity/amount, ingredients, reuse/recycling symbols, alcohol warning. Information for allergy sufferers, information about the manufacturer – the list of things that have to appear on a beverage label seems dizzyingly long. Space on the label, on the other hand, is extremely limited. And we still haven't come to the best thing that can appear on a label: OPP, or on product promotion. A label's most important job.

So much to say, so little space

The questions that should be asked are: What makes a good label? And how can I, as a manufacturer, make my label special? If you were to ask this to a room full of marketing students or media designers, they would definitely spurt out: "Display an eye-catching logo!", "Use sophisticated pictures and graphics!" And a few would also suggest using a more minimal design, or special printing techniques. Lots of different things, and yet somehow, they're still always the same.

Design alone is not enough

If you're trying to make your product look unique on the shelves, surrounded by hundreds of comparable products, is it enough to simply make the label more colourful, use a different design or adopt new lettering? Especially when technical developments in the printing industry are advancing rapidly and becoming more universally accessible... No. Because from a neutral customer's point of view, this ultimately means that labels and their supposed special features all end up looking very similar –despite the fact that the label is the 'face' of a drink bottle and proven to create the most critical first impression. What's more, labels are the only means of communication that actually reaches every one of a product's consumers.

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This is exactly why every label needs this hype effect. It must draw attention to the product. Roman Schellmoser, Managing Director of Büroecco Kommunikationsdesign GmbH in Augsburg, Germany, clarifies this by saying: "Labels need an individual story. There must be something there that involves people!" It has to convince the customer, making them pick it up and buy it. In other words, it must explain what is in the bottle and why it's worth buying this product. And last but not least, a good label can also turn new customers into regular customers, building a relationship.

Just by glancing at shelves stacked with sodas, or even glancing at the range of craft beers or craft spirits, it's clear to see that a lot has changed in recent years in terms of beverage labels, and the diversity of labels has become much more important. Globally, customers now have access to many more products in the beverage industry, making it necessary for manufacturers to expand all arms of their marketing. The trick is not to jump on every bandwagon: design your own innovations and think about which label is the most convincing for selling each product.

Hello, I'm here! – The brand on the label

The label assumes the function of brand ambassador. Ideally, the way the label looks should describe the company's corporate philosophy, telling consumers at first glance who you are, whether you are classic and traditional, or new and crazy. There are hardly any limits when it comes to improving brand presentation on labels. Especially with casual customers, the first impression is crucial. Even for consumers who know the product well though, you can give a product a new image by introducing carefully considered revisions to the way the brand is presented. The Madonna principle: Remain who you are and yet constantly reinvent yourself. This prevents boredom, and gives the customer the chance to try 'something new' whilst still remaining loyal to the brand.

A gentle touch for regular customers

Of course, you shouldn't overlook the fact that conservative regular customers will be more sceptical about changes to the label. You could even scare them away if you're unlucky. How should things look then? Roman Schellmoser explains: "The brand DNA should be preserved and a certain continuity should be maintained." So don't just use new-fangled stuff. One way to do this is by introducing the new while preserving the old. The

Bavarian family distillery Penninger provides a good example. Their best seller, the Penninger Blutwurz, which is presented with a traditional label and shows the brand to be classic and reserved, gained a cooler, younger brother: Penninger Blutwurz Black. “The famous Penninger Blutwurz, now in a different outfit,” as the company described it. “The black bottle of our Blutwurz presents the other, more urban side of Bavaria – more leather jacket than lederhosen.” This way, a new brand was created without imposing too much change on traditionalist consumers. They also present new products with a new, modern look, such as the anniversary version of Blutwurz with cherry – the Penninger Blutwurz Red.

Would you like a taste? – Evoking the senses on the label

What does it taste like? Delicious. – Simple facts don't really help the customer. A detailed, expert description of a drink's sensory characteristics is exciting for both new customers and for consumers who know the type of product well already. And it's a delicate thing, especially in the speciality beverage sector. If there are different styles of beverage, the description of the sensory characteristics helps to ensure a level of distinctiveness. And what's more: this is where hype comes into play again! Because, in contrast to a consumer who knows the product well, potential new customers need that typical moment of “Would you like to try it?” hype. After you've grabbed their attention, the customer decides within nanoseconds whether they'll just look or, if they are convinced by what they see, whether they'll pick up. But “Would you like to try it?” simply isn't possible in a retail set-up. So, in the small space left on the label, it's crucial to characterise the product as accurately as possible in words and pictures – without overstraining the customer.

The type of product plays an essential role in this. In the case of beer, if it's brewed in a certain style, the range of sensory description can be huge – for a bottle of water though, the potential is much less.

The way the information is presented is crucial. A nice example: the back labels on Riegele speciality brews. Small icons attract your attention, while the text next to them concisely and precisely describes the most exciting features of what's inside. The graphic representation plays just as important a role as the wording. The two should be balanced. The customer needs the image first and foremost to direct their focus to the description. Then, in turn,

the description explains the sensory properties in a simple and concise way, illustrating “the craftsmanship behind the production”, says Schellmoser.

Don't forget me! – Gimmicks on the label

Things like freebies, special features, etc. are kinds of advanced marketing gimmicks. Doing these well is hard work. From QR codes, to wooden labels, to introducing the manufacturers: everything and anything is possible. These extras are really good when they create strategic added value, promote brand differentiation, or surprise the customer (in a good way).

For a good gimmick, you don't need loads of marketing experts on your team or million-dollar budgets; even small companies can do it brilliantly. On the label of its light-coloured 'Gruibinger Saukalt' beer, Lammbrauerei Hilsenbeck put a blue dot made of thermal lacquer which changes colour depending on the temperature, telling the consumer: “Careful, your beer is too warm!” It's a pretty smart gimmick that adds a lot of value: it underlines the product name, it's easy to use, and it brings about a sense of playfulness (go ahead, put your finger on it and see how the colour changes). And it clearly stands out from the rest – differentiation is key.

When you use gimmicks, you need to pay particular attention to ensuring that the label remains graphically appealing, whether that's through images or wording. QR codes are often rather intrusive graphically-speaking, but are increasingly becoming a necessary evil. At the end of the day, something on the label needs to involve the potential customer. For example, the vodka brand Grey Goose has created a technical gimmick in cooperation with the French premium packaging designer Dapy: a waterproof, wireless electroluminescent label. This is obviously the top league of modern label design: it shines, stands out and makes the customer 'see the light'. Exactly what a good label is all about.

Sex, gender, politics – statements and taking a stand on labels

Provoking and polarising has also become a popular marketing trick in the beverage industry. Many brands have already attracted attention in this way – and not always in a positive sense. Labels that are particularly politically motivated have always been the subject of repeated criticism. These are related to subjects like racism, sexism and homophobia.

But there are the positive examples too, where a snappy slogan on a label points out injustices. Or ones that are simply just funny. And this generates new customers. Especially in sectors where there needs to be a leap from older generations to younger ones, provocation and humour are adequate means for this – and they can be used without completely scaring away the older customers.

Labels from the Emil Bauer & Söhne winery are a successful example of this. Winemaker Martin Bauer wanted to set an example and show what the winery stands for by naming their wines things like 'No Sex', and using slogans like 'If you can't be happy, at least you can be drunk', or 'If you are a racist, terrorist or just an asshole, don't drink my Sauvignon Blanc'. The younger ones like it, but the older generation has also reacted more positively than expected. Bauer himself was somewhat surprised: "It was astonishing that older customers also reacted positively. But of course, there are such and such consumers." It takes a certain amount of self-confidence to stand above it. A good product – together with good marketing – is always the required foundation for this, of course. Because in the end it's the inner values that count - no matter how good the cover is.

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