

# Wrapping up your message; sustainable storytelling through packaging

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**Abstract:** Besides contributing to the actual sustainability performance of a product-packaging combination, packaging can also play a role in communicating about sustainability. Such green marketing aspects of packaging may either focus on the sustainability credentials of the packaging itself, or on the credentials of the product contained (or even the company or brand). Communication about sustainability can be explicit (in words or labels) or implicit (through materials, images and/or colours). The implicit form could be described as sustainable aesthetics. The explicit form can be presented either as factual information or in the form of stories.

People engage more with stories than with factual information, as it allows for easier connections with previous experiences. Hence, storytelling makes for a compelling marketing tactic. Instead of telling a story yourself as a brand, enabling and encouraging your consumers to tell your story to their peers offers strong marketing potential as well.

This paper will explore sustainable storytelling through packaging by reviewing the literature on storytelling within marketing, with a specific focus on sustainability and on packaging. Furthermore, two small empirical studies will be presented, followed by a design case study.

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Keywords: advertising, sustainability, storytelling, consumers.

## 1 Introduction

Within the topic of packaging and sustainability, historically, the first and main focus has been on reduction of the environmental impact of the packaging itself. Recently, in line with the strong societal attention for food waste, the notion of sustainable packaging is shifting towards optimizing the total packaging-content combination [e.g. 1-5].

Besides contributing to the actual sustainability performance of a product-packaging combination, the packaging can also play a role in communicating about sustainability. Such green marketing aspects of packaging may either focus on the sustainability credentials of the packaging itself, or on the credentials of the product contained (or even the company or brand). Communication about sustainability can be explicit either in words or labels (see e.g. [6]) or implicit through materials, images and/or colours. The strategic use of colour in packaging is a field on its own [7]. Such an implicit form could be described as sustainable aesthetics. The explicit form can be presented either as factual information or in the form of stories.

People engage more with stories than with factual information, as it allows for easier connections with previous experiences [8]. Hence, storytelling makes for a compelling marketing tactic. Storytelling has for instance been shown to interest consumers for food products otherwise deemed uninteresting [9]. Woodside et al [10] give five reasons why stories are such strong marketing mechanisms:

1. People think in narratives,
2. A large proportion of memories are anecdotal,
3. Remembering and retelling stories is a positive experience,
4. Brand stories help people to be who they want to be,
5. Stories help bring clarity.

Woodside et al [10] go on to explain what makes for a good story, without addressing the aspects of packaging or sustainability, which are the focus of this paper. Crittenden et al [11] argues that sustainability is slowly being seen as an opportunity instead of a problem in marketing, and that storytelling is one of the tools to change the DNA of an organisation to a more sustainable one. Although it wasn't included in an earlier attempt to map the social component of sustainable packaging [12], but this topic could be perceived as a part of the social component of sustainability, somewhat in line with the perspective of Nordin and Selke [13]. Some research lines that focus on the role of users in creating sustainable packaging, such as Lofthouse et al [14] on refillable packaging and Wever et al [15] on litter prevention, may be considered to be related to storytelling, in so far as those approaches would result in explaining to users for which sustainability reasons certain design choices were made.

## **2 Some examples from practice**

Academic literature does not provide many examples of sustainable storytelling through packaging, although Jedlička [16] provides the example of backgroundstories.com, an attempt to offer consumers insight into a brands environmental efforts through storytelling, without pushing it onto consumers. She does not provide details on the actual application and or successfulness of this approach, though. In practice there are however many companies utilizing storytelling in relation with packaging and sustainability.

Unilever, for their Dutch detergent brand Robijn, ran TV commercials that were quite literally storytelling, as it involved a physical pop-up book, with a child as voiceover, telling about the sustainability success of concentrated detergents, resulting in less packaging, and less distribution (and therefore less scared hedgehogs).

Tony's Chocolonely is a Dutch brand striving for fair chocolate. Their chocolate bar is divided into irregular pieces, which is meant to represent the unfair distribution of profits along the value chain of chocolate. This story is further explained on the inside of the wrapper.

Innocent smoothies is a brand well-known for their stories. They worked with dedicated copywriters for the jokes that are on their packaging (such as the rules for riding a dinosaur). In between the jokes they communicate about their story of the ethics of the brand and the quality of their ingredients.

Boxed Water starts their story with a friendly 'hello', continuing with an explanation why they believe that "Boxed water is better", which has to do with their packaging supposedly being more environmentally friendly than bottled water in their geographical context.

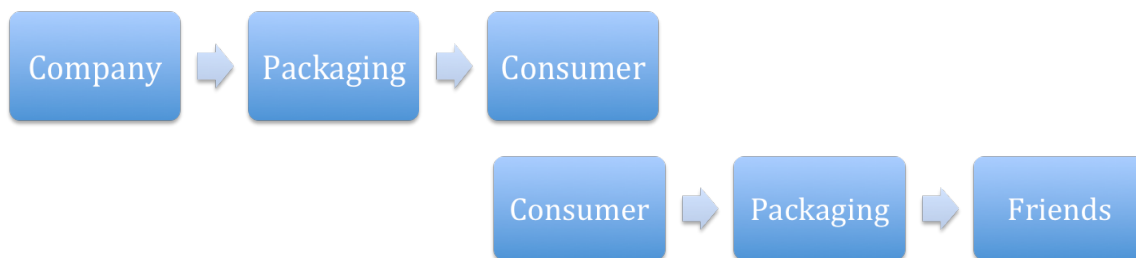
## **3 Conceptual framework**

Brands can communicate about the sustainability of their packaging or can communicate through their packaging. As mentioned before, this communication can be on packaging, product and brand level. If we map the practical examples from the previous section, we get the classification presented in Table 1 below. Such a classification or taxonomy can be useful in exploring options when considering a storytelling approach.

The examples in section 2 are all primarily aimed at telling the brand story to their consumer. Although the story of Tony's Chocolonely is on the inside of the wrapper, thus aimed at the eater (who need not be the purchaser). However, as Figure 1 clarifies, the packaging may also help in having your consumers spread your story to their peers, either directly or through social media (which will be further explored in section 5, the design case study).

**Table 1:** classification of sustainable storytelling and packaging.

Communicator Topic	Company	Packaging/ product
Company	-	<i>packaging tells about company</i> (e.g. Tony)
Product	-	<i>packaging tells about product</i> (e.g. Innocent)
Packaging	<i>packaging is topic of story</i> (e.g. Unilever)	<i>packaging tells about packaging</i> (e.g. Boxed water)



**Figure 1:** Packaging as story in two different conversations.

#### 4 Exploratory studies

In order to obtain some insight into how consumers evaluate sustainable storytelling through packaging, two small studies were executed. In study 1, 35 people exiting a Dutch supermarket (Albert Heijn) were asked to quickly rank 5 different packages with regards to sustainability *appearance*. The participants were Dutch, aged 16 or over, with 14 male, 21 female.

These five packs (see figure 2) applied sustainability-connected communication, some using sustainable aesthetics (e.g. brown colours), while others used more storytelling techniques. Besides Innocent and Tony's, which were mentioned in section 2, there was a green box of 'Blije Kip' ('happy chicken' in Dutch) with several sustainability-related labels. There was a box of Dorset cereals, which didn't hold any sustainability claim, but utilizes a graphical design strongly linked to sustainability, through non-gloss printing in brownish colours. And there was a box of Homemade traditional Dutch cookies. This cookie mix is packed in a brown FSC certified cardboard box, with simple graphics.

After completing the ranking task, participants were asked to explain why they ranked the packs the way they did. In this study the storytelling packages scored worse than the sustainable aesthetics packs.

*Blije kip* eggs were the most popular, followed by the two brown cardboard boxes (Homemade and Dorset cereal). Most people looked at the material (and colour of those materials). That is the main reason why the green and brown products scored the best (see Figure 3). Due to those most important factors, Innocent and Tony's did not score so well. Another point which became clear, was the fact that many people associate a certain product with (un)sustainability. Cereals for instance are healthy and kind of organic and therefore associated with sustainability. Tony's and Innocent were ranked last most frequently (13 and 16 times respectively), see Figure 3. In this figure also the average rank and reasons for chosen ranking are provided.



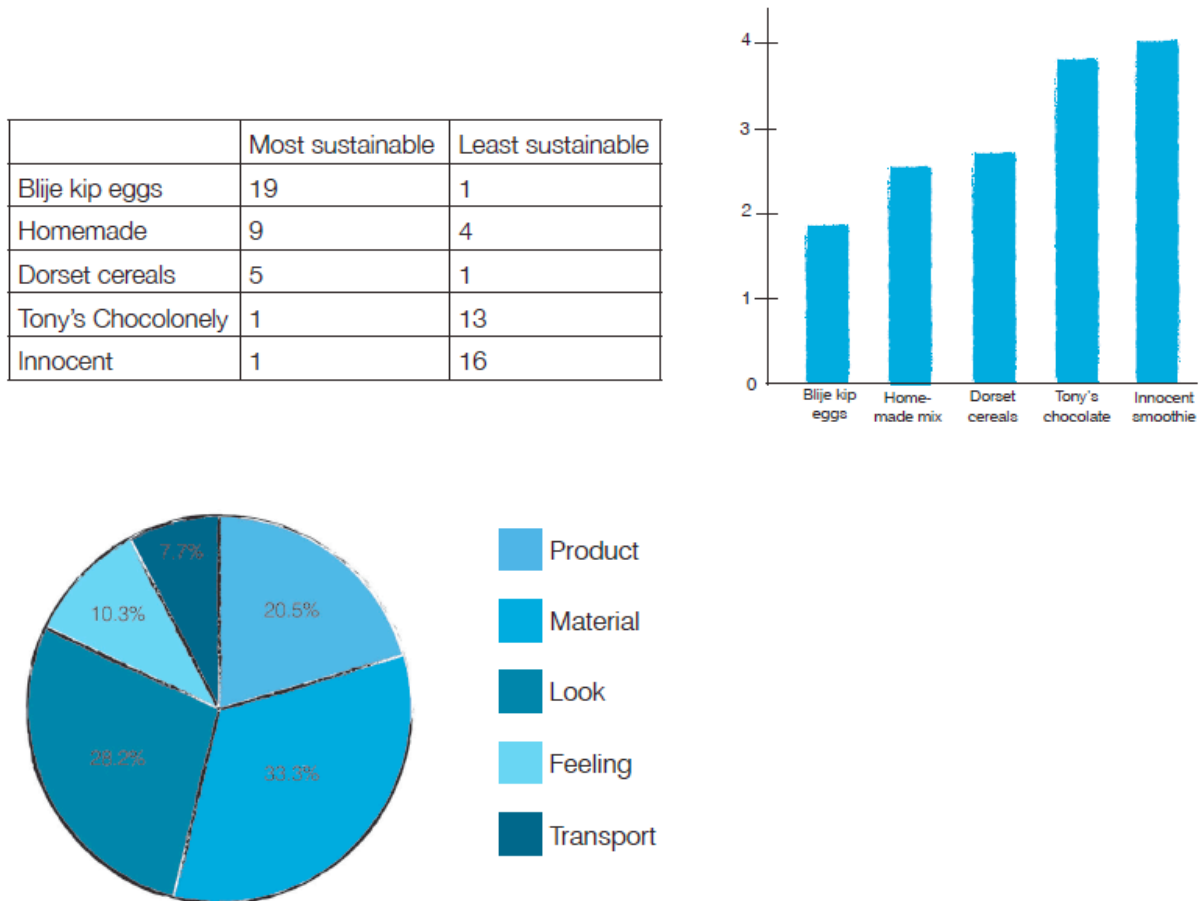
**Figure 2:** The five packs used in study 1. The top 3 were also included in study 2.

After the first study, the common opinion about a sustainable appearance was quite clear. However, the two packs that were considered as having the least sustainable appearance were the Tony's and the Innocent. These packages tell their sustainable message through storytelling, not by their colours or materials. In the first study, none of the participants based his or her choice on storytelling. However, this may be based on the time-limited research method. Hence, a second study was performed.

In study 2, a different sample of 35 people was interviewed in more depth about three storytelling packages, to gain more insight into what works and what does not. In this study the top three packs from Figure 2 were used.

The goal of this second research is to find out which way of storytelling is the most effective for an average consumer. To be sure that participants understand our objective, it was explained to them how every package tells its story. In this way, everybody got the same information before choosing the best packaging. Participants were allowed to look at the products carefully and then chose the one

which they liked or which attracted the most. The different ways of storytelling are the colours, big text (eggs), the jokes and pictures (Innocent), and the story inside the package of Tony's.



**Figure 3:** results form study 1.

The Blije kip eggs scored the best again (54.3%), because most people wanted to see the story at first sight. After that the Innocent drink scored quite good (31.4%), because of the little jokes and the presence of many coloured pictures. The fact that Tony's puts its story inside the wrapper is considered as the least attractive (first pick of only 10.3%). The wish of participants to see the story at first sight corresponds with the findings of the first study. However, participants who were in favour of Tony's actually appreciated the fact that it was inside. It should be said that nearly all participants who chose Tony's as favourite, knew the product beforehand. The other two products were also chosen by participants that were not familiar with those products.

## 5 Design case study

The two surveys in the previous section were part of the analysis phase of a student design project for the packaging of a new smartphone for the company Fairphone. Fairphone is an Amsterdam-based company striving to bring fairness to the supply chain of mobile phones. With their Fairphone 1, which launched late 2013 in a limited badge, the focus was strongly on conflict minerals used in the production of mobile phones. Within the Fairphone 1 box, users already received a set of postcards that told the story of the phone, see Figure 4. However, it turned out that people did not send out these postcards to their friends. Instead, they posted pictures of them on social media. This let the

design team to a concept integrating social media 'props', allowing users to integrate them in selfies posted on social media. The props are an integral part of the box the students designed for Fairphone. In this way the packaging becomes more intriguing, thus communicating more effectively between the brand and the user, while simultaneously inviting the user to communicate with their social network. As Fairphone does no direct advertising themselves, having their story spread by users through social media is fully in line with their communication strategy. As such,



**Figure 4:** The postcards coming with the Fairphone 1.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

Green marketing is a well established field, in which packaging can play and has played a role as a communicator. All too often this role has been on communicating through private or third-party labels. While in green marketing, in general, the power of storytelling is acknowledged, in relation to sustainable packaging, this attention has been limited in academic literature and sustainable design guidelines (notwithstanding that there are many examples from practice).

However, sustainable storytelling through packaging may well result in an increased value perception in the eyes of the consumer. As such, it is a sustainable design strategy that by itself does nothing to reduce the eco-burden of a packaging, but does add to the overall sustainability of the total design, when viewed from the Eco-costs/value ratio approach [17].

This paper has provided a first analysis of the different approaches to sustainable storytelling through packaging, and has pinpointed some of the challenges. These challenges mainly lie with the current marketing attention on packaging having a focus on the so-called first-moment of truth, i.e. the communication power of a packaging on a retail shelf. It is known that this in-store communication window has a very limited timeframe, which is a challenge if you want to tell a story. Packaging design that strives to tell a sustainable story may perform worse on first impressions than packaging design based on green aesthetics or eco-labelling. However, it is aimed more at the later options of communication, striving to have a lasting conversation with users once a product and a brand have entered their lives. This does mean that evaluating the effectiveness of a design concept requires different research techniques, as packaging design testing is often focussed on first, or at least quick impressions [e.g. 18-20]. However, focus groups, which are often used in the packaging world, might be highly suited.

This paper distinguished between companies using storytelling in other media to tell about their sustainable packaging, and companies using their packaging to tell stories about their sustainability efforts, which can then subsequently be on a company/brand, product or packaging level. This paper also distinguished sustainable storytelling between brands and their users on the one hand, and between users and their social networks on the other. Both seem to provide strong opportunities for sustainable marketing, and may well go hand in hand.

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