Thinking out of the Box;  
the Unpacking Experience of Consumer Electronics Products  

Renee Wever and Alejandro Del Castillo C.

ABSTRACT

Due to developments in the consumer electronics (CE) market, as tougher competition, low brand 
loyalty, and the rise of discount retail formats, the communication value of the product packaging is increasingly 
important. The packaging has to sell the product, through attracting attention, communicating distinctive 
product features and generating a “feel good” sensation about a product and a brand.
This requires more attention for the design of the package, which has to fulfill more than only distribution-
related functions. These new functions do not only focus on closing the sale, but also on what happens 
afterswards. The positive emotional feel towards a product and a brand needs to be strengthened by the 
unpacking and the experience of unpacking the product. This means that the unpacking experience becomes 
something that is to be designed. This paper reports on several experiments aimed at understanding the 
unpacking experience of CE products (and some other durable consumer goods). First, a group of consumers 
was interviewed about things they liked and disliked about unpacking CE products. Second, several focus group 
sessions were held studying one particular CE package. Finally an experiment was performed studying the way 
pople open clamshell packaging for durable consumer goods; a type of tamperproof packaging that is 
notorious for its limited openability.

INTRODUCTION

Packaging for Consumer Electronics (CE) products has to fulfill multiple functions. Traditionally these 
functions were all distribution related (e.g. protection, facilitating handling). Nowadays however, due to 
commoditization of CE products (Spector, 2005, p. 65-66, 185), the sales functions of the packaging 
have become more important, and as a response to this commoditization, the added value packaging can provide 
through the unpacking experience has become important as well.
The importance of sales functions is a result of the changed retail situation of CE products. So-called ‘Category 
Killers’ have entered the market, and they are gaining market share. Category killers are budget shops with a 
wide selection of products within a limited segment, such Best Buy, and Circuit City in the US, MediaMarkt and 
Saturn in Europe. Furthermore hypermarkets such as Wal-Mart in the US and Carrefour in France have also 
begun to sell CE products in their stores. The display of goods in these types of retail environment is different 
from the traditional mom-and-pop store that displays unpacked products in a locked showcases. Category killers 
and hypermarkets sell packed products from the shelf, with only a limited amount of sales assistants available. 
Hence the product has to sell itself; or rather the packaging has to sell it (Wever, et. al 2006, Underhill, 1999 p. 
32, Marzano, 2005, p.368, Imhoff, 2005, p. 33-34, 38-39). Furthermore, the directly accessible products, 
combined with the relatively low number of shop assistants, raises the changes of pilferage. Therefore packaging 
has to be big enough to make it difficult to smuggle a product out of the store. The package also has to be 
tamperproof, meaning it should not be possible to open the package without the use of tools, to prevent people 
from taking the product out of the package in the store.

When products become commoditized price becomes a dominant factor in product choice. Hence 
margins for the manufacturer decrease. To counter this development a brand needs to have added value. Pine and 
Gilmore (1999, p.16) propose that companies create experiences instead of mere products; “Manufacturers must 
explicitly design their goods to enhance the user's experience as well - essentially experientializing the goods -
even when customers pursue less adventurous activities. Automakers do this when they focus on enhancing the 
driving experience. (...) What changes could an appliance manufacturer make to its white goods that would 
enhance the washing experience, the drying experience, and the cooking experience? (...) If you as a 
manufacturer start thinking in these terms - inging your things - you'll soon be surrounding your goods with
services that add value to the activity of using them and then perhaps surrounding those services with experiences that make using them more memorable. (...) Any good can be -ing-ed.” Within the CE field brands like Apple and Bang & Olufsen work very strongly with this strategy. For packaging, experientializing means creating an unpacking experience for your product. The importance of the unpacking experience for CE products is expressed by Marzano in his book on 80 years of Philips design (2005, p.373): “(...) the new Philips marketing strategy involved offering experiences rather than just products. It was important to communicate the emotional dimension of what was inside the box, and this obviously had to be achieved through the packaging.”

One example of a packaging that was redesigned with the unpacking experience in mind is the new package for the Senseo coffee maker (www.maxsbd.nl).

Pine and Gilmore (1999, chapter 3) provide a five step plan for “experientializing” a product (e.g. creating an unpacking experience for your package): 1. Theme the experience, 2. Harmonize positive cues, 3. Eliminate negative cues, 4. Mix in memorabilia, 5. Engage the five senses.

On the first point, theming the experience may be as simple as mimicking an existing experience. It does not necessarily mean involving Disney characters. If we look outside the world of packaging there are several real-life examples of great ‘unpacking’ experiences. Think of the unveiling of a statue, or the waiter coming to your table with the meal under a silver plated cloche. There is a scale of options here:

- Presenting (like a waiter presents a wine bottle, or the stereotypical silver platter)
- Unveiling (like the unveiling of a statue, the opening of a stage curtain, or unwrapping a gift)
- Revealing (unveiling followed by presenting, like a diamond ring box)
- Teasing (showing just part of the object, like a split in a woman’s dress)

At this point, it is important to realize that the unpacking experience is but a single act in the total brand experience. Still, it is the first act that will draw the consumer closer to the actual product. The theme chosen for the unpacking experience has to be in harmony with the brand experience. This means for instance that the unpacking experience of Philips should be in harmony with Sense and Simplicity, and the unpacking experience of a Panasonic should match with Ideas for Life.

The second point, the harmonization of positive cues, is a call for consistency in the unpacking experience. In connection to this, the third point, the elimination of negative cues, means taking away anything that does not add to a positive experience. For a package this implies that it is easily opened, something that is not commonplace in a world of tamperproof clamshells. It also implies action on other frequent negative cues as too big packages for their content and too much waste left over. Mixing in memorabilia, the fourth point, is part of the larger brand experience. One should not try to mix them into to the unpacking experience, although the packaging may play a role in brand memorabilia. Finally as the fifth step, multi-sensory stimulation is something that is not applied very often in packaging for CE products. Usually they are only visual. Scents, sounds and texture are rarely applied to enhance the experience of the unpacker.

Based on this, a model can be made for building a great unpacking experience (see Figure 1). Some aspects are always essential, these are openability (elimination of negative cues), the multi-sensory approach (the triggering of other senses than sight alone) and the consistency (harmonization of positive cues). From this there are basically two avenues that can be followed to theme the experience. The first is a logic approach, presenting the product and accessories in the most favorable way, at the logical moment in the logical sequence. The other approach is that of surprise. As Van Hamme and Snelders stated (2001) theoretical arguments and empirical findings strongly suggest that, a positive surprise may play an important role in consumer satisfaction. This can be done by applying the principal of unveiling, revealing or teasing.

Before proceeding to the empirical studies, which were executed to validate the model presented in figure 1, it is important to make this point: the three different groups of packaging functionalities identified (distribution related, sales related, experience related) are not always equally important. Their relative importance is dependent on the type of product, the brand and the type of retail outlet. This can be explained with three examples of computer brands: Dell, Medion and Apple. Dell sells its products through the Internet. The packaging has no sales function at all, and only a very limited experience function. It is mainly a distribution package. Medion is a brand that builds computers for price-conscious buyers. It sells solely through low-price supermarket chains like Aldi. Hence the packaging has primarily a strong sales function. Due to the budget price it has now experience function. Finally Apple is a brand that is strongly focused on experience. Their products are often sold in their own Apple centers. And otherwise, they still do not really compete on the shop floor with other brands, due to their loyal customer base. Hence there is hardly any sales function. The distribution function is of course still present in the Medion and Apple packages (see Figure 2). A similar thing may happen within one brand. For example Philips produces electric shavers that are virtually identical for the US and European market. Due to the different retail environment (more category killers and hypermarkets in the US displaying packed products on the shelf and more stores in Europe displaying unpacked products in locked showcases) shavers for the US market are packed in clamshells and shavers for the European market are often packed in smaller cardboard boxes. This is a clear consequence of a difference in sales function. Next to this Philips has special gift packages for the top-end of the market, which focus more strongly on the experience functions.
To get some empirical data to support the model, three separate studies were performed. First an survey was conducted asking people about unpacking CE goods. Second, several focus groups were held, studying one particular CE product (a CD/MP3 player). Third, an openability experiment was performed asking people to open clamshell packaging for an electric shaver, and a second durable consumer good.

![Fig. 1 (on left): A model for building the unpacking experience, based on the theory of Pine and Gilmore (1999). The experience is based on openability, a multi-sensory approach and consistency. On top of this basis there are several possible scenarios. Their suitability depends on the brand experience, of which the unpacking experience is just one part.]

Fig. 2 (on right): Positioning of packaging functionalities for three brands of personal computers. Dell’s packaging is dominated by distribution functionalities, while Medion’s packaging is a mix of Sales and Distribution, and Apple’s packaging is a mix of experience and distribution. (This graph is based on the brands in general, and might differ for specific products).

**STUDY 1: INTERNET SURVEY**

A survey was conducted through the Internet (N=64) to get a feel what consumers think/feel about unpacking consumer electronics. The survey asked about the most recent purchase of a CE product and about previous purchases that were memorable either in a positive or a negative way. The survey contained two separate open questions for positive and negative memories from the unpacking CE products. This question is most relevant for the validation of the model. Similar responses to these questions were grouped. The following point were mentioned most often (the number between brackets shows how often it was mentioned): Simple, practical, no unnecessary extras (35), Good, esthetical design (29), Right size (compact) (26), Strong, offers protection, induce trust due to quality (26), Good interior lay out/arrangement of parts (21). The negative aspects mentioned most often were: Too much waste and separately packed parts (35), Package is too big (31), Product is difficult to get out of its package, too tightly packed or anti-theft-plastic packaging used (26), Package is boring or uninspiring (16). These findings indicate that people acknowledge the need for protection and accept the resulting packaging design. This factor, combined with well thought-through design can be classified as positive cues in the unpacking experience. However, they dislike the sales-related functions (big packages, tamperproof packages) that presents them with problems of openability and waste disposal. These two factors can be considered negative cues in the unpacking experience.

**STUDY 2: FOCUS GROUPS**

Following the survey three focus group sessions were held, each with 4 people participating, evaluating the packaging of a portable CD/MP3 player of the AEG brand. The product was sold in a large drugstore chain in the Netherlands, meaning it is presented as a budget product. This retail environment would make it a product with strong distribution and sales functionalities and limited unpacking experience functionalities. The box was reasonably volume efficient. The CD/MP3 player was on its side, in a PE film. On opening the packaging the
buyer would find the folded cardboard inner packaging in which product and accessories both receive an equally prominent place. Participants were not told about the retail environment or the price. The product was used as a starting point for the discussion, and participants were also asked about experiences with other durable consumer goods. From these focus groups the following conclusions can be drawn:

− The AEG box looks cheap, but the products is cheap, so it matches, but the package also looks lousy. The product looks (somewhat) better than the package it comes in, so that is a missed opportunity.
− People expect cushioning foam as protective material in CE packages, and they also expect accessories to be packed separately in PE bags. (This expectation does not necessarily mean they like it!)
− People like to be able to take back the product, hence they prefer a package that is not destroyed in opening. Resulting fro this potential take-back, they also keep the package for some time after purchasing the product.
− Products people do not use often, like a compass, they like to store in the package.
− People like the product and accessories to come out of the package in a more logical and orderly fashion.
− People claim they are not influenced by the sales function of packaging of CE products.
− The different materials, that should go into different waste receptacles, annoy people.

This study again confirms that there are small details that act as negative cues, which annoy people unpacking the product. Furthermore it is emphasized again that the sales function of the packaging is something that is important to the product manufacturer and the shop keeper, not to the consumer.

STUDY 3: OPENABILITY

Finally, a true unpacking experiment was performed. A group of participants (N=25) was asked to each un-pack two products packed in clamshells (i.e. blisters). This was done in one-on-one interviews. Participants were filmed and asked to think out loud (describing with spoken words their actions and feelings, either positive or negative) during all the given tasks. The experiment was either executed at the participants home, or at the university in a setting resembling a home, because it is the most natural, often used environment to unpack such products. The first part consisted of unpacking a general consumer-good product packed in a plastic clamshell (e.g. earphones, children’s toys, neck support pillow, a window alarm). Afterwards, they were asked to unpack an Electrical shaver package, of which three different models were used, and finally a series of general questions about the unpacking were asked.

As for the first part of the interview, it was observed and concluded that participants:
- Already had a very low-price/low-quality perception of the products that were packed in clamshells (blisters).
- Agreed, right after observing the package, without any action, they agreed that it would be a hard task to get the product out of the package (8). Some of them even remembered unpleasant past experiences (3).
- Were intuitively looking for a corner with a clue or a hint that would lead them to unpack the product (all participants).
- Were not being able to find clues in most of the cases (4 persons opened the packages with their own hands). Using a tool was the next option; scissors (9) or a knife (8). 2 participants used their teeth to open the packages, which diminishes the experience, it causes negative surprises and in some cases (2) drew the participants to act in a more aggressive manner and might even hurt them in a physical way.

As a general conclusion of this part, people desired to be guided and helped through the experience, By offering clear indications on what actions to follow and which was the right tool for the task.

In the second part, the task was to unpack the product and take out all of the contents. The responses, actions and expressions from the participants helped making the following conclusions:
- The package was impressive enough to raise the expectations of the participants, but the clamshell lowered the people expectations towards the unpacking.
- Participants felt irritated at some point by the fact that no clues were offered on how to open the clamshell, This provoked in them “wrap rage” (an American term that describes the anger consumers feel towards packages that cannot be opened easily).
- 2 participants sustained minor cuts when trying to reach for the product, and others (12) expressed in someway the discomforting feeling that they were afraid of scratching or cutting themselves on the blister material. This reduces people’s experience by giving them a negative feeling even before holding the product.
- During the unpacking, even though it was not expressed in comments of the interviews, most of the participants (18) had to repeat the same action in order to get to the product, for instance, having to cut the clamshell in the same place more than once. This made them feel insecure of their actions and mislead by the package design. It also induced to wrap rage. They desired to be fully guided and explained what type of actions to make.
One interesting remark from participants concerned smell. In four cases, it was mentioned that the package emitted a bad smell during the unpacking (possibly due to some plastic components that react being enclosed in a sealed clamshell). This happened before reaching for the product, and it instantly lowered the people perception towards the experience. This comments helped to conclude that other senses can be as strong and as influencing as sight. A positive influence on them (smell, touch, sound) can contribute to a good unpacking experience.

- The participants perception of the price of the product compared to the package is opposite. The product was perceived as a high quality object, and the package is seen generally as a cheap way to pack such product.

As a general and concluding remark, participants in the second experiment also expected to receive more clues and help on how to open and take out the contents of the package. Furthermore, they expected to have the most important part of the package first (in this case the shaver) and not last. The relationship of this experiment with the formulated theory is clear, there is a set of minimum requirements that consumers expect, to create an unpackaging experience. The more the bases are well defined and set, in aspects such as consistency of actions, openability clues and guidance for opening, the better the unpacking experience for the user will be. Thus, a better overall product perception will be obtained from the moment the consumer holds the package until the final product is taken out of its package.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

For some CE products the experiential aspects have become a highly significant part of the added value of the product. For such products the unpacking experience can make a substantial contribution in staging these experiences. Designing an unpacking experience is challenging, as conflicts may occur with other functional requirements of the packaging (distribution-related, sales-related). The clearest example is the conflict with the requirement that the package should be tamperproof. Non-tamperproof packages can not be sold in a large percentage of the retail environments, but the resulting wrap-rage makes a positive unpacking experience impossible. Another example is that packages designed for their unpacking experience may become more bulky, due to the layering and placement of the product and its accessories. This is at conflict with the logistical efficiency; something of increased importance now that production has moved to low-wage countries, which has increased transportation distances.

The theory of Pine and Gilmore was successfully translated into a model for the unpacking experience (figure 1), which can help designers create a great unpacking experience. However, it was found, that small details in a package design can act as negative cues. Hence testing a new package design in a unpacking experiment remains a wise thing to do.

The current level of package design for CE goods shows there is still a lot to be gained. New design solutions are needed that combine logistical efficiency with being tamperproof and with a great unpacking experience. Current and future work at Delft University of Technology focuses on this challenge.

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REFERENCES


CONTACT

Renee Wever, PhD researcher, Design for Sustainability Program
Alejandro del Castillo, Graduate student, Industrial Design Engineering
Delft University of Technology, Landbergstraat 15, 2628 CE Delft, The Netherlands
Tel: +31 15 27 82120, Fax: +31 15 27 82956, e-mail: r.wever@tudelft.nl