

Wild Oats

Why Quarter's Back Panel Design Is So Innovative

Autumnal memories of oatmeal, raisins, and brown sugar wafting out of the kitchen are a key emotional equity associated with Quaker just as campfire crackles evoke Hershey's s'mores and grilling-induced perspiration beautifully mirrors the condensation on a bottle of Bud. Somewhere along the way, however, a variety of factors made it difficult for Quaker to maintain their emotional connection. Here's what Quaker did to reconnect and what other innovators might consider doing for their brands.

Consumer package goods brands, even iconic ones such as Quaker, face a daunting set of challenges in maintaining emotional connectivity.

- At many retail chains, private label products have morphed into store brands that are often as good as or better than their CPG competitors.
- Retailers have squeezed CPG margins, which have created merry-go-rounds where price often gets to stay on the pony while brand sits on the sideline watching.
- The 25,000 new products introduced every year have crowded shelves and resulted in consumers just tuning out.
- And while designers have done good work with a wide range of niche brands, the package design of many CPG products reflect a mentality that feels like "this is the last communication we ever have with the customer so better throw in as many messages, visual elements, and branded ingredients / processes as will fit on the box, bottle, or can.

The cereal category certainly exemplifies the "last communication" rule. Even when one accounts for screaming packages whose objective is to get little Johnny to nag his mom into making a purchase, it's still a pretty busy space. Quaker stepped into this fray and did something that was pretty innovative. As part of a larger effort to tell "our oat story", the back panel of the Quaker Oat Squares features a giant indicia with the words "expertly milled Quaker Oats", a picture of scoop over-flowing with oats, a tag on the scoop that evokes some sort of farm labeling system, a short sentence on the brand's heritage, and four products (Chewy Bars, Squares, Life, Quaker Oats, and Instant Oatmeal) that are made from the grain. There are several reasons why this is so innovative:

- First, it's a clean design, something that the category hasn't exactly been known for.
- Second, since it can't evoke fall mornings it does the next best thing, create powerful visuals as the reasons-to-believe its story.
- Third, it uses oats to cross-sell the line, something that is actually less intuitive than it sounds because Chewy bars and Life cereal don't necessarily have the connection to the grain as Squares and Instant Oatmeal.
- Fourth, the packaging is an extension of the Web site, a consistency of communications that's particularly important in a world where so many shoppers are researching products before making an in-store purchase.
- Fifth, while oats are a commodity, "our oats" is a strategic platform strong enough to support brand communications across almost all Quaker products.

Contrast Quaker's innovative communications with Fiber One, a brand with the type of garbled messaging that's typical of the category. Although there are a lot of messages on the front panel, it's the back panel that's the most interesting point of comparison with Quaker. The package cross-sells other General Mills cereals (Carmel Delight, Frosted Shredded Wheat, Raising Brand Clusters, and Honey Clusters). But there's a challenge and a lost opportunity with this approach.

- In terms of the challenge, the shopper has to work harder than she should to get the connection between these 4 cereals – 3 of which scream “sweet” – and the original, and more healthy-looking, Fiber One. That’s a brand architecture drop that could be easily fixed.
- In terms of the lost opportunity, Fiber One actually crosses multiple categories – but you wouldn’t know that the brand is also in everything from muffins to cottage cheese. The lost big idea is that no matter how you want to get your fiber, Fiber One has a solution for one. That’s a more damning drop.

In some regards comparing Quaker and Fiber One isn’t fair, as the former brings some pretty impressive brand equities to the party and the latter is trying to tout a health benefit that seems like yesterday’s news. But Quaker took a commodity and made it the star of their emotional story. If Fiber One can’t pull its own emotional levers, perhaps it could at least make it easier for mom to see the brand as a solution to a health need that she forgot she had. A pedestrian product telling a powerful story? Now *that* would be innovative.