



cs1_modular

b.t. mcelrath packaging system

the project:

B.T. McElrath Chocolatier, maker of fine hand-crafted chocolates, needed an identity and packaging system to launch their company, brand and product line in 1996.

the brief:

1. Branding and packaging to reflect their product: premium hand-crafted chocolates made the old-world way.
2. Branding and packaging should differentiate from competing brands, including giants like Godiva and regional chocolatiers.
3. Startup with a tight product launch budget.
4. Request for flexible package labeling to accommodate product changes (types, flavors, ingredients) and product line additions.
5. Design to reduce environmental impacts. Use recycled, recyclable, renewable, non-toxic materials and processes where feasible.

research:

1. A causal audit (including a lot of sampling!) of the marketplace showed that competitor packaging consisted mostly of paperboard cartons with laminated finishes (gold foil, faux velvet or cloth), molded plastic shells and folded sheet plastic acetate boxes. Packages were often sealed with with ribbons and bows.
2. Brown, red and gold were found to be the dominant colors in this product category
3. Exploratory estimates from carton manufacturers indicated that a custom box would be cost prohibitive for the small quantities this start-up required. These estimates also showed it would be far too expensive to print a stock box for every product and size (4 sizes x 4+ assortments).
4. FDA food packaging rules at the time prohibited food from coming into direct contact with recycled materials.
5. Like other perishable food products, the lifecycle of chocolate packaging is quite short. Given that, the packaging materials should be renewable (e.g. not petroleum based) and non-toxic. The package should also be designed and labeled for disassembly, or to enable the separation and recovery of different materials.

creative process:

Concept A.

In our brainstorming sessions, we hit on the concept of modularity. By making a system of components, we could maximize flexibility while minimizing waste (\$ + resources). Our first idea was to print stock, recycled craft boxes (4 sizes) with a one-color pattern. These patterned boxes would act as the base piece. The remaining package components consisted of either a tag (see A2 on page 2) or a series of labels applied to the boxes carrying brand, flavor and ingredients information (see A1). The flavor and ingredient stickers could be added or updated as needed.

Concept B.

Our second concept, which also employed modularity, was inspired by a challenge. Could we come up with a solution that did not require the printing of the stock boxes with a pattern in order to save even more money and resources? By using stock, unprinted boxes, B.T. McElrath could then order as needed in small quantities. Our solution was a “strap and label system”(see B1 and B2). The idea was to use a printed paper strap to secure the box, create a bold graphic statement and a unique package. The flavor and ingredients labels could be added and updated as required.



Concepts/branding as presented to client. B2 was approved.



Modular packaging system components.



Final packaging & identity.

production notes:

Boxes	Stock, recycled kraft with 40% post-consumer waste.
Straps	2-color, printed with soy-based inks on 80 lb. text, 100% recycled paper containing 20% post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free (PCF). Diecut.
Labels	2-color, printed with soy-based inks on non-toxic, water soluble gum-arabic coated label stock.
Stamps	Red and black rubber stamps (inspector code and date seal) use non-toxic, water-based inks. The stamps were also an inexpensive way to add color and a hand-crafted touch to the packaging.
Product tray	Formed plastic. This was required for food safety reasons. Perhaps PLA would be an alternative material today.

outcome:

The product, branding and packaging were all very well-received when launched in 1996. The unique, old-world look of the packaging helped drive people to try a new brand and the product has had them coming back ever since. Today, B.T. McElrath is well known for its award-winning complex flavors and is sold nationally.



lessons:

The concept of modularity was inspired by nature's principle of diversity. By creating a system of independent components that, when assembled, became a "unified whole" we were able to reduce the large amount of waste and expense associated with an all-in-one unit. For example, if an ingredient changed or a new flavor was added (the kind of fine-tuning required by startups) only one part would need to be replaced or added rather than the entire package.

Even simple design decisions had a big effect on the project's success. One example was the shelf presence gained from using green as a differentiating brand color rather than the ubiquitous brown and gold. Another example is the appreciation and good will that customers have expressed for the package's recycled and recyclable content.

The hand-crafted quality of the design was a perfect way for a start-up to get noticed and create a buzz. The design garnered many national design and eco-design awards. However, with increased volumes, the hand labor involved with the strap and label system has slowly given way to more standard pre-printed boxes (not created by us). I guess timing and appropriate scale are other important considerations.

credits:

Design firm: Studio Flux

Art direction: John Moes, Holly Robbins

Design: John Moes, Holly Robbins

Illustration: Ken Jacobsen
