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The Use of Ethnographic Research in Product Development

A study on the grocery packaging problems of
elderly people

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Abstract

It is thought that one of the best ways to gain information for the development of new products and potentially the adaptation of older ones is through the use of ethnographic research during the development and research phase (Cooper & Edgett, 2008). The world's population is ageing and it has therefore become necessary to include elderly people more in the development of new products, particularly where research suggests they are encountering difficulties with grocery packaging, among other products. Product developers need to find solutions to these problems.

The ethnographic research used in this study has been valuable in finding out what the problems are that elderly people are experiencing; how they are overcoming or getting around these problems, as well as what could potentially be done to develop appropriate solutions. It was found that elderly people are having difficulties with more traditional styles of packaging, like glass bottles, jars and aluminium cans, as well as some newer packaging types including ring-pull tin cans and freshness seals on milk bottles. These results are similar to those of previous research in this field (Duizer, Robertson, & Han, 2009) . Based on this ethnographic research and the above mentioned survey, it has been found that the current guidelines in place for packaging (shown in Table 1) are inadequate from an end users point of view, given that they focus primarily on function and environmental impact and less on openability. An adapted version of the Principles of Universal Design (Appendix VIII) would be immensely beneficial in helping to make the packaging industry more aware of the packaging problems elderly people are faced with, as well as ways to circumnavigate them.

Summary

This research project was made up of two main parts: ethnographic fieldwork, and a survey of the elderly and their use of packaging. The survey consisted of a number of questions aimed at finding out what sort of relationship elderly people had with grocery packaging: how often they shopped; which packaging types they preferred; which ones they had difficulties with; and other packaging problems they encountered. By having a researcher accompany participants around the supermarket, it was possible to gain a rare insight into the participants' experience of an everyday shopping trip. This allowed the researcher to see first-hand what sort of packaging the participants bought, and question them about their choices

The survey found that the participants were shopping frequently - one or more times a week and that most of the participants asked for help when opening difficult packaging. It concluded that the most problematic packaging type were glass jars, ring pull tins, ring pull bottle tops, and aluminium dinking cans.

This ethnographic research also showed that, in addition to the problems mentioned above, the elderly encountered problems with blister pack-style packaging and child proof closures. While the survey showed that the elderly experienced only moderate difficulty with freshness seals - like those found on more recently developed milk bottles, the ethnographic research revealed that all participants experienced problems with these. Only through the observation of the participants in the supermarket and during ensuing conversations were the researchers able to understand the difficulties the participants were facing and learn about the various tools they used to overcome these. All of the participants used tools (from tools designed for specific packaging problems to knives and scissors) of some sort to open difficult packaging. Furthermore, the findings of the research suggest that there are a lot of problems related to the communication of product information on labels due to the labelling being either hard to read or difficult to decipher.

The research also showed that the guidelines currently in place in the packaging industry are far from suitable in aiding in the minimisation of problems elderly face when opening packaging. These guidelines place minimal emphasis on end-usability and more on the function and environmental impact of a given product. It is therefore clear that changes need to be made to ensure packaging is designed to be more user-friendly and with increased openability, while still containing the product adequately (E.g. restrictions on the amount of force needed to open lids, and surface area guidelines for packaging parts that need to be gripped in order for them to be opened).

A set of universal design principles for the packaging industry needs to be developed so people will be able to access a package's contents easily. The aim of packaging is to contain and preserve a product, not to prevent the user from gaining access to it.

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