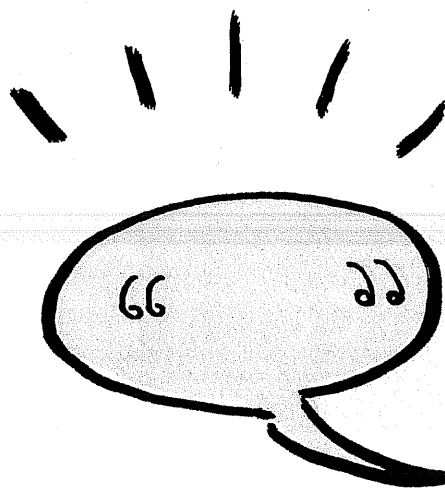


## DO WE SPEAK WHAT THE BUYER NEEDS TO HEAR?

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place” — George Bernard Shaw

By Meera Seth



SALMA ALI GROWLED AT THE pasta that was taking so long to cook. She then reached for the half used jar of pasta sauce sitting in the fridge. She could read not a word; the font was too small for human eyes, likely 4 point, she guessed. Salma got her glasses and turned the bottle to read: “Ingredients’..., then ‘Discover other products of Brand XX (*this was in larger font, bold*)... then BEST BEFORE 36 MONTHS FROM MANUFACTURE (non-bold), store in cool

dry place / Refrigerate after opening/ For any suggestions... (*in 3 point*)... then suddenly the font went upper-case and 12 point: MRP (inclusive of all taxes): Rs 195. (*Then, in ultra mega tiny font*) For batch number, date of manufacture, please see back of the jar).

Salma let out a cry. What was ‘back of the jar’ in a round bottle? She swirled the bottle around. There was nothing. Imported by India, Product of Spain, Manufactured in Italy... but

no date of manufacture of any kind. Even so, don’t things have a shelf life once opened, she wondered.

Switching on Safari, she Googled ‘toxicity in tomatoes’ and bingo, she came upon the USFDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Services site, where she read that high acid canned foods — tomato was one of the 30 others listed — had a storage-on-shelf life of 12-18 months and after opening, a life of 5-7 days in the refrigerator.

Salma put down the jar slowly on

the countertop remembering the times when opened jars had remained in the refrigerator for months. Ehsaan, her brother, would not have looked up any site for shelf life. She was about to throw away the bottle, when a sentence on the website caught her attention: *'Throw away carefully. You don't want animals, children, or anyone else who might rummage through the trash to get ill.'*

It was 11 p.m. Salma called Abhi, "This is so shameful. There they care even for tramps and animals. Here we don't care for consumers!"

**Abhi:** *Yaar*, this is the bane of business today. So careless! But we must first check our own products Salma. Let us take a look tomorrow?

The next day, Abhinav called for six of the products that were under his care. And sure enough, Kanto products too had consumer data all over the place. As he sat there staring at the spread before him, the MD, Prakash Udpa, poked his head into his office and said, "A deep moment...?"

Abhi looked up slowly, a bit lost in thought, then said, "I think we have never looked at our products as consumers, but always as makers, designers, creators... too lofty a position.... Prakash, why do we have our dates and storage information and instructions scattered? Wouldn't you think that ideally you begin with manufactured date, best before followed by storage conditions and use within after opening, all together?"

And Prakash saw all the packs....

**Prakash:** We could not be the only guys doing this. Let us get out some 50 different brands and see the general attitude to pack communication.

By noon, an assortment of products sat on Abhi's table. Salma and Thomas Chacko (product manager) joined them.

**Salma:** Ok, here we go, branded *chana dal* — 'packed (PKD) 6/2013'

## Consumers are lazy when it comes to complaining

on this side, then... on the other side, it says best before (BB) 6 months from packaging date...Store in a cool dry place. Clear inkjetting and larger sized fonts. But, of course, it does not state expiry.

**Prakash:** Commodities typically have no expiry. We get staples from the hills for the whole year...

**Salma:** I do not know, but as a consumer I ask the *dal* brand, 'Then why give me this information?'

**Abhi:** We need to link expiry dates to healthcare, tell the consumer you can store the product only for so many months because being a tropical climate you can be infected by weevils. Product can spoil. So ideally *dals* should be used within 3 months of buying. Instead, we say, let them buy, let them decide, they will get it right... we are not trying to engage with the consumer on this, educate her, tell her what can be the fallout of weevils.

**Salma:** Because we feel that our conditions are already so suboptimal, eating weevil-ridden *dal* will definitely not kill. Healthcare is not an item on our agenda. Don't we say, if you can eat *pani puri* on the streets then why can't you drink tap water? Same logic.

**Abhi** (laughing): You may have a point, well... now, we have Kay's mixed fruit jam. Best before 12 months from packaging. No info on when it was packed. So turn it

around... hmm, it says 'PKD and for batch number see lid'. I look at the lid and I get to see inkjetted 12/2012. So.. three different spots for the same related information. Next, extra virgin olive oil... hmm... this one had a date sticker which, it seems to me, the shop keeper has peeled off. Now we will never know. But here where it says MRP, the printed label says BB 24 months from date of manufacture... but it does not say where to find that... So, I go around the bottle... sorry, no date available.

**Prakash:** Now Kay's tomato ketchup. After MRP, it says 5/2013; BB nine months from PKD is written below the MFG date. But in a very small font. Nothing about storage...

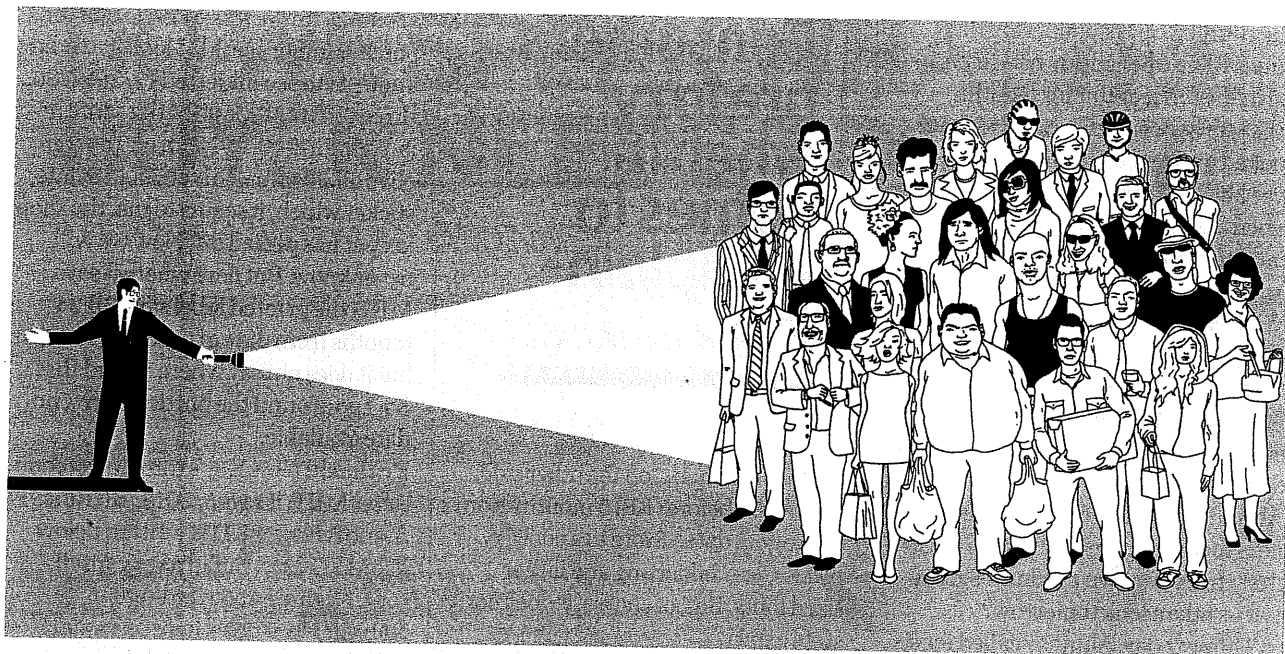
**Salma:** No, it does, here on my jar! Store in a cool dry and hygienic place at 31 degrees after opening and...

**Abhi:** Wow, same brand, but mine is a refill pack. How come different data systems for the same brand?

**Salma:** It also says 'Recommended refrigerate after opening'. Wow... never heard of this. I have **never** refrigerated ketchup! Have you? But why 'recommended'? Why not be clear? Either you say Refrigerate or say nothing. Likewise, why 'Best before'? What's the catch?

**Thomas:** Soya sauce, PKD 7/2012; then EXP 7/2014; Very clear. Now storage information.... is very far away. Yeah, I know it is on the same bottle of 2 inches diameter, but you see how you are taking my attention away, you are making me search for it. *And I need not...* When I buy a product I must get all this in one place for me to deduce what I need to do. Only expiry date is necessary at the time of purchase. But when I come home, I have to search for how to store and I may not see this! All this should be together. Where do I look, below, above, around, on the seal? It is all over the place and in a most frustrating font!

# CASE STUDY



**Salma:** I do think marketers don't care. Literally, I mean that. They care that you buy, so they use bazooka marketing. Then they leave you to your confusions and questions, and they also know you do not know where to go ask your questions! At the time of buying as well as at the time of consuming, women normally look for this info every time they reach for the bottle. Especially soya sauce since it is used less often.

**Thomas:** See, the next data is "BB: see cap"... so right from the foot of the bottle I am expected to jump to the cap. Meanwhile, "Storage instructions: refrigerate after opening." Very clear, not 'Recommended'. Ok, now we go to the cap... Sorry, there is no BB date. No sticker or inkjetting.

Oh, here is a sticker: Ravi Kumar & Company; MRP, BB: See label, MFG date: See label. Net weight: See label; Month of import: 10/2012. What will a consumer do with just the Month of import? Should you not be telling her how long this can be used?

**Abhi:** It's clear, the importer was

supposed to inkjet the BB date, but 'decided' not to. That is how you ensure your ROI! Who audits control weaknesses in imports?

**Thomas:** Problem is Indian consumers have a certain lethargy when it comes to complaining...

**Salma:** Who do you complain to? Think about it. The retailer? Then again, most homes are run by hired help; so user and consumer are divorced. You tell the cook to make hakka noodles, you will get hakka noodles. Cook does not know about BB dates.

**Abhi:** Here is ketchup from Laska Brands. This one also says keep refrigerated after opening; Best before is fine. But where is the manufacture date? ...Oh it's got erased. What is this 7/2013? Ok, Batch date. Rest has faded...

**Salma:** Here is a different question. I need to bake today so I buy a tin of cocoa. Mind you, I am not a professional baker. At the end of eight months I still have that tin of cocoa with me on my shelf. Meanwhile, we have been through summer and monsoons and

the climatic conditions have been impacting my kitchen climate. Does the brand owner know if my brand experience is as he designed it to be? Do I, the user, realise that my rich gooey chocolate cake has a flat taste because my cocoa has aged and not because I am a bad baker? Point is, I would be concerned if my consumer's tin of coco has been lying around for so long. There is a level of deterioration associated with any consumable with time. It gets oxidised... is the product good enough to deliver a tasty cake? As a brand owner, I would worry whether my consumer will get the same joy from using my product that is 8 months old! Wouldn't you as a brand manager prefer me to use fresh stocks?

**Abhi:** So, what would you do?

**Salma:** Food products must come with a fluorescent sticker which you encourage buyers to paste on the tin with dates such as: Opened on; Use before. If it is in my handwriting, I am more likely to find it and use it. Then again, you are getting me to partici-

pate in the freshness process.

**Thomas:** And equally, you, the brand owner, will be under direction to provide me with data whereby you get the consumer to partner the brand!

**Salma:** Absolutely! 'How relevant am I in a consumer's life?' And that relevance lies in your understanding that consuming is a longer process than buying. Your job does not end with selling but in and through the experiences during consumption. What has been your buyer's consumption experiences?

The other deterrent is that increasingly, people are not hands-on cooks themselves. The hired help does not even know that the fancy Ranch Dressing she is using to make your salad has an expiry date, a storage condition, a BB date. You do not know how long the tetrapack milk has been lying open. And in what condition. Do you put a sticker on your tetrapack and say: Opened on? If so then the 'Consume within 3 months of opening' caveat makes sense. But you don't. You always think you will remember.

**Thomas:** So true! I always think I know when I bought my bread. But I respond only when it gets moldy! Now see, my cook has never asked me if she should refrigerate the ketchup, likely because in flat number 3005, where she works, madam does not refrigerate ketchup, so no reason why the *sahib* in flat 1005 should refrigerate ketchup! But then frankly, I did not ever know that ketchup needs refrigeration!

**Prakash:** (laughing) Ok, here is branded rosagullas from a *namkeen* manufacturer; MFG: 9/2013. BB 31 May. Nothing about how long the product can be kept after opening the tin. No caveat to say product cannot be left in the tin, if the product MUST be transferred out for fear of oxidation... Then, I come to the third panel,

## Understand that consuming is a longer process than buying

Ingredients, oh, here: To dealers and consumers: do not sell if puffed up. Store in a cool dry place. *But for how long?* Now, in a completely different spot, it says, Cut whole lid and consume product on the same day. So, 5 pieces of information on different parts of the packaging.

**Abhi:** Wait a minute. You did not see. This tin comes in an outer carton. The packaging date, the expiry date, etc., are all on the outer carton *but not on the tin!* (Everyone examined carton) Typically, families will discard the carton and retain the tin, as often the outer is damaged. Do you worry that the information on both can be different? Ok... carton says 'MFG date, BB date, see bottom of tin.' (They all peered with Abhi at the tin's bottom...) Oops... there is nothing on the bottom of the tin! Ha, ha, ha!

**Thomas:** Did you say consume same day? I opened a tin 10 days ago... been popping one everyday... will I die?

**Salma:** You are more likely to live and fall sick for a long time. Why don't you read the tin before eating?

**Thomas:** *Arre!* If it is written I will read *na!* I didn't even get this outer carton. And the paper on my tin was ripped..

**Abhi:** Prakash, these are the realities of consumer usage. Labels peel off; tins get dented. Cartons get battered; as a brand are you taking cog-

nizance of how the brand data holds up in retail? How are you actually selling to the consumer? The info you seemingly planned for end user is not reaching him... you don't even have a legal leg to stand on. Now, this business about 'consume product on same day'. This 1 kg tin has 14 rosagullas. If Chacko bought a tin, he was definitely not planning to eat all 14 on the same day. So, either you scream this message out upfront, or you make smaller SKUs!


**Salma:** You know, if you were to read the entire pack print of any brand, you will see that the marketer is having a disjointed conversation with the consumer. One minute he is saying how to cook it, the next moment he is saying cool-dry-place, then he is listing ingredients, then he is saying it should not be puffed.... is this how we normally converse? And what on earth is a cool dry place? Manali?

**Abhi:** What is air-tight container? It is a generic statement like, 'be a good boy'. But for how long?

**Salma:** Ok, malted drink for growing children. ...Oh, God so *much* data! Who reads all this! What a holy clutter! At the back 'BB 12 months'...then 'replace cap after use'. *Really!* What a useless piece of information! 'Store in clean dry place, away from sunlight' — now this sunlight bit needs to be upfront, not hidden between maltose and sucrose.

**Prakash:** Ok, guys, I am already feeling terrible. Let's put all expiry and storage information in two blocks on a pack so that there is a focused window of information. It will build trust in the consumer that 'my brand experience is more important to the manufacturer. But honestly, why did none of this strike us ever?

**Abhi:** Well.... **BW**

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 Businessworld case studies



# EDUCATE AND INFORM

*A 360° communication on a pack ensures a firm handshake between the brand and the consumer*

**M**ALCOLM GLADWELL may call it 'a tipping point' but many of us just know life has its *aha* moments. For Kanto Products too, that moment probably came with

Salma's visual wrestling with her half-used jar of pasta sauce. That she raised it with her colleague Abhinav and that ripple carried through the marketing team (Chacko) and upward to the MD Prakash Udpa, is creditable. Rarely is a junior brand person's observation so valuable!

Many of us in the consumer packaged goods (CPG) world could be accused of reducing our packaging to the role of a well-dressed town crier. We lend our voice to it to make it deliver only the following: 1) Attract buyer 2) Communicate message 3) Create desire for the product, and 4) Sell product.

Brands tend to concentrate on the front of a pack because seldom do they expect the consumer to read all that is written all over.

Food brands tend to do the same. They settle for a great photograph and then use key adjectives such as Cholesterol Free, Sugar Free or Home-style to project attributes they think the consumer will place a value on. Some go to the extent of describing products as Original, Super or Premium.

The goal is to ensure packaging pops out on the shelf and differentiates itself from other brands. Food shots can be exaggerated to the point where the picture

looks nothing like the actual product. While this might induce consumer purchase, it will rarely help in repeat buying. Designers may win awards for a great looking pack, but consumer dissonance could be lurking around the corner

*The back panel is often ignored.* Companies believe it not to be a space for powerful communication, a space where they ought to somehow comply with regulatory norms encompassing ingredient statements, bar codes, nutritional panels and minimal usage instructions such as 'Replace cap after use.'

As a result, brands lose out on the opportunity of using the entire pack to properly educate and inform consumers about important aspects of the product. Consumers need to be informed about the necessary facts on nutrition such as fat, carbs, proteins, etc. Where relevant, attributes such as organic, vegan, Kosher or Gluten-free must be highlighted.

Most consumers are unaware of functional and regulatory information, which must be organised well in one panel only, and not be scattered around. Abhi and Salma are rightfully shocked at the lack of clarity on expiry dates and product price while looking at Kay's Jam, caused by faded inkjetting, peeled-off stickers and data in different places.

Care must be taken to ensure people understand the language used. Please say 'Best before' instead of BB.

Easy contact information on how consumers can reach out in the event of a query or complaint must be provided.

Having taken care of regulatory norms, it is important to educate con-

sumers on other useful information, which may prevent wastage or spoilage of products. In addition to providing shelf life information, a simple direction such as — 'once pack is open, keep *unheated* product in the refrigerator for up to three days' provides additional information on usage and storage.

Smart brands ensure they point out important innovations of having introduced a 'cold spot' in a microwavable pack to prevent burn injuries like Conagra does with its popcorn.

A leading maker of tomato paste provides 'Hints and Tips' of mixing tomato paste with water to use as stock, or add to soups for added flavour, or stir into risotto — taking the consumer into new areas of product usage. The pack then goes on to educate consumers on the fact that tomato paste is one of the richest natural sources of lycopene, which is a powerful antioxidant. The brand effectively informed and educated the consumer on product attributes that may normally not be known.

A 360° communication on a pack ensures a firm handshake between the brand and the consumer. It is fortunate packaging starts with 'P' else even the 5th place it gets in a 4P world (Product, Price, Promotion and Place) would have proved elusive!

The simple truth is consumers are increasingly spending more time on the back of the pack than on the front. Companies should do the same. **BW**

*The writer is Managing Director, Tasty Bite Eatables*