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# PACKAGE DESIGN<sup>®</sup>

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Magazine

## From Distant Shores

Distant Village Is Bringing Handmade  
Artisan Packaging into the Mainstream

### Special Sustainability Issue:

Nine Greener Case Studies  
Designers' Roundtable Part 2  
Transparent Green Marketing  
Tetra Pak's Wide-Angle View

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## Hot Topics Designers' Roundtable

Our panelists discuss the latest trends in sustainable design and green marketing (Part 2 of 3).

In the second of this three-part series, we discuss what sustainable packaging innovation means today, the challenges of sustainability initiatives, greenwashing, and all-natural branding. Part 1, in the November issue, covered what innovation means today, how private label is affecting the market, and the origins and limits of the simplicity fad. Part 3, online in December, delves into how the business of design is changing, the effects of over-reaching advertising agencies, and how retailers are often calling the shots.

### The panelists are:

**Ronald deVlam**, founding partner of Webb Scarlett deVlam

**Bill Goodwin**, founder & CEO of Goodwin Design Group

**Norma Kwan-Waski**, cofounder and managing partner at John Waski Design

**Dale New**, senior vice president of DePersico

**Tom Newmaster**, partner at William Fox Munroe Inc.

**Leslie Tucker**, principal of IQ Design Group

**Robert Ziegler**, president of Brandimation

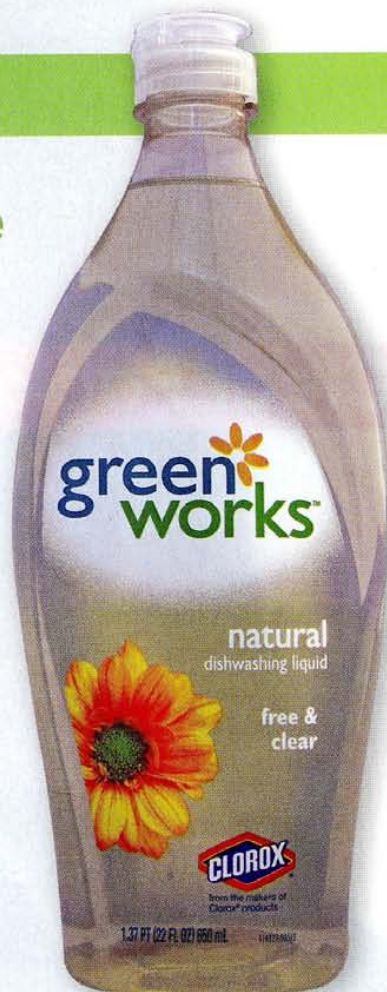
### In the down economy, have sustainability initiatives in design briefs been expanding even more?

**Tom Newmaster:** Everyone talks about it, but it seems like with the client mix we have, we're the ones bringing it up, not them. They are saying: "We don't want to use a material that has some negative aspect to it, and we don't want to add on unnecessary packaging." But they're not pushing us to use more sustainable materials or reduce the packaging materials a certain percentage. I always try to put some type of sustainable element in the recommendation because it's definitely not going to hurt. That's just one more positive reason, or a good reason, for someone to buy that product over something else. I'm trying to work those things in, but I'm not being pushed to.

**Robert Ziegler:** I think it's part of every project that we're engaged in, though typically not the primary driver. It's become part of the vernacular; any time there's anything to do with structural components and material choices, it's brought up. Both the client and our company actively engage in conversations about the environmental footprint of what we're doing. That said, eco choices aren't being made for their own sake. Value is still the driver of all decision-making. In certain categories, sustainability is more of a driver than in others.

**Ronald de Vlam:** I think it's still on an upward trajectory and I'm still getting a lot of briefs where the sustainability element has to be very well considered. I think that's in part because of Walmart's Sustainability Scorecard, but it's also a part of appeal-

A major challenge of sustainability initiatives is balancing the natural materials gains while still assuring consumers that the product is effective.



ing to the consumers who are much better informed than they were before. I think they can appreciate what a brand can do by being greener. I'm reading with interest about how the Sun Chips bag didn't win the consumer acceptance that I thought it would. The noise factor was a kind of blight on that particular format. But, in other areas, companies like Microsoft and Kraft see sustainability as a great consumer story to promote and—quite often—it also means considerable cost-savings for them. If it's a double win, it gets put in the design brief more often.

**Bill Goodwin:** It frustrates me when you turn over a typically recyclable plastic package and it shows a #7 instead of a #2 or #3. Why is that? Toys R Us introduced a green line a few years back, but people just weren't ready for it. But we still promote possible sustainability gains in every presentation. Another problem is that there aren't enough universal symbols yet. Some out there are good, but we should have standardized symbols to make it easier for everybody.

### Where is the pressure to address sustainability coming from?

**Ziegler:** There's a lot of "innovation" being done for cost reduction, and as a result of material reduction, that can also be called eco-innovation. So they're typically bottom line-driven initiatives. There are also companies out there looking for breakthrough innovation to drive long-term, top-line growth. These companies realize that we're in a position that we haven't



## SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING ISSUE



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Secondary use of a product or package is a sustainability strategy that resonates with consumers.

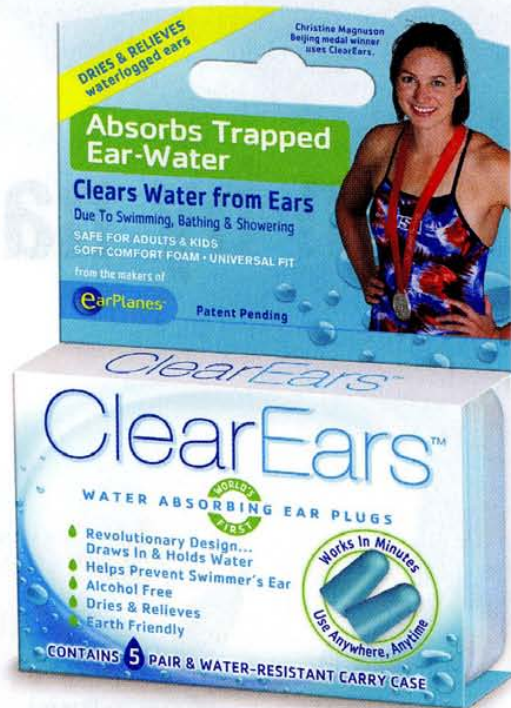
been in for several years—that companies with a strong cash position in a down economy can hire the best talent, create long-term insulation, and develop an intellectual property portfolio around breakthrough innovation. Those companies are going to see significant market power shift their way in the next three to 10 years.

**Norma Kwan-Waski:** In general, many of us are conscious about environmental issues and trying to create more sustainable packaging, but arguably more can be done. Especially with some convenience-focused products, many of these convenient packages have caused more throwaway which is the opposite of sustainable thinking. Ironically, even some of the convenient size packaging for organic food products is not recyclable. This is somewhat of a vicious cycle, and change as we know is not always easy. While wanting to use less energy is good, to many CPG companies this may involve hidden costs and risk factors that may hinder them from rethinking how much they want invest for long-term rewards. In recent times many have turned to concentrated products and more refills, and these are small steps in the right direction.

**What are the design trends are giving new life to organic or environmentally friendly consumer goods?**

**Dale New:** It's really all about authenticity and believability. If you're packaging something organic or all-natural, it's got to look authentic. We've seen it evolve from organic and natural that had to look like the farmers did the artwork themselves. Now it's more sophisticated in the look, but it's sophisticated Birkenstock—not sophisticated Madison Avenue. And that's a tricky thing to get right. If anything is out of whack, it's a house of cards and it all falls apart. People don't believe it.

**Kwan-Waski:** I think all-natural products are thankfully walking away from the expected browns and greens. The packaging is becoming focused on aspiration. If you walk into a Whole Foods, the bright colors are grabbing attention. The trend is



more toward appealing packaging than the “earthy” imagery these products used to carry.

**Ziegler:** On the recycled content side, I think that there's still value in brown box/green graphics because I know as a consumer that it's “made from recycled materials” and I can trust that what I'm consuming isn't excessively depleting natural resources. Anytime that sustainability can also be coupled with cost reduction, it's a good thing. Anytime it leads to a cost increase, it tends to be for a niche market. It just mirrors U.S. consumer behavior. If it's sustainable and the cost is the same, I believe a majority of U.S. consumers will buy the more sustainable option. The lifestyles of health and sustainability (LOHAS) consumer is still a growing niche consumer; they're not the majority consumer.

**New:** Sometimes that's a challenge when you're trying to do food photography on recycled board. You don't get as bright a white and you might not get as appetizing a look. Purely from a product development standpoint, there's also an impact. One of the promises of a seafood client called Three Promises is that they are not going to damage the oceans. The whole brand message is sustainable, so that's exciting to see. What we found there is that it's a brand issue and a corporate issue, and you need to be able to communicate that. All other things being equal, people will go for the more sustainable, earth-friendly product. I don't think in this economy people are willing to spend a lot extra for that, but I think there's a heightened awareness of it. The messages that the schools are teaching are getting through, and it's becoming part of our culture.

**Do you feel that sustainable packaging gains should always be called out on the package?**

**Newmaster:** If we're going to be use a more sustainable material, we're definitely going to call that out. There's really no nega-



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tive side to it, so I kind of push them to do it. With some of the materials we're working with now, the consumer wouldn't even know that it's made of recycled material.

**Tucker:** Recyclable structures are important, but I don't think consumers are going to buy a product just because it's in a paperboard box versus a plastic bottle. Consumers, being what they are, still want their products' graphics to look and feel the way they want them to, whether that's clean, fresh or efficacious. I'm not sure if we've come to the point where a consumer will buy a product because it looks and feels "recyclable."

**de Vlam:** I'm of the opinion that consumers don't necessarily need to see sustainability promoted on packaging. But it's really important for them to know that the brand they're investing their dollar in is a brand owned by a company that, hopefully, does good things for the environment and for the planet. There's a corporate messaging element that is really important, and bigger companies are taking that very seriously, even though they're not always shouting too loudly about it. That's because it's always easy to have a counter-voice to sustainability efforts and be critiqued for them, and by being a little humble and doing the hard work in the background, you can also gain a lot of traction and consumer acceptance.

**Ziegler:** There are three primary ways of approaching packaging sustainability that have meaning to consumers: Reduce virgin material usage, produce using recycled materials, and produce products that are readily recyclable. It's harder to get across other lifecycle components like energy consumption and emissions.

**de Vlam:** With a brand like Stonyfield, on the other hand, it's so much part of their brand essence and the whole Stonyfield company mission. So the messaging on the Stonyfield packaging can do a lot more promoting of their environmental goals



The sustainability-minded Source toothbrush by Radius outlines all of the sustainability and effectiveness benefits on the back panel.



Shades of browns and greens are still effective at quickly indicating "greener" to consumers looking for new ways to live more sustainably.

and ideals. If we improve a Microsoft package's eco-metrics 50% on Walmart's scorecard, it's not something that consumers get very excited about, but in other kind of news, media, or reports, it can become a significant message for Microsoft.

**Ziegler:** I think consumers are appreciative of source reduction, particularly when you're talking about multi-component packaging. Many packages out there could become reduced- or single-component packages. Consumers will appreciate that, but they won't necessarily know that they appreciate it. They're just dissatisfied with over-packaged goods. Even if we shout about what we did, they wouldn't jump up and down, they'd just no longer frown. So, I don't think consumer awareness matters much in this kind of thing at the package level. But at the roll-up level—where we toot our own horns about how many millions of pounds of plastic were eliminated—the overall company brand image may improve your relationship with the consumer, and of course you've improved your bottom line margins.

## Is greenwashing an industry problem that will wash out in the future?

**Goodwin:** The pressure to out-market the competition pushes people to do things and say things that are just bending the truth. We struggle with this with some kids' foods. If it's not clear whether it's a treat or not, we have a problem. And we'll turn down the work.

**Newmaster:** It looks like consumers have gotten a little smarter. They can see beyond claims. All-natural consumers in general don't want the mainstream. So rather than make your mainstream brand natural and organic, CPGs are coming out with an organic or natural line.

**New:** Everything has consequences, so you have to be careful sometimes. It's a balancing act, but the good news is there are a lot of new technologies out. The recycled boards today look a lot better than they did 10 years ago. It seems to me that Walmart is using their power for good in this case. Whatever they do, the rest of the world is going to follow. No one is going

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to make a package for Walmart and make a less efficient package for someone else. It's making things better for everyone, even though it's a little tougher.

**Ziegler:** Perhaps the biggest win is creating packages that are both made from recycled material and can be recycled, and making consumers aware that what they're doing is feeding back into a system. They can see evidence of it in the same package they're about to recycle—that's fantastic. That messaging gets across to consumers and they're like "Wow, this is really cool" because then they believe that they own it. They have ownership in their own effort, contributing to the greater good. And that's a pretty neat feeling. ■



The proposed revisions to the FTC Green Guides ([www.ftc.gov/green](http://www.ftc.gov/green)) indicate that marketers and designers are responsible for backing up claims made on packages, and FTC recommends qualifying each claim with more specifics real-world expectations.