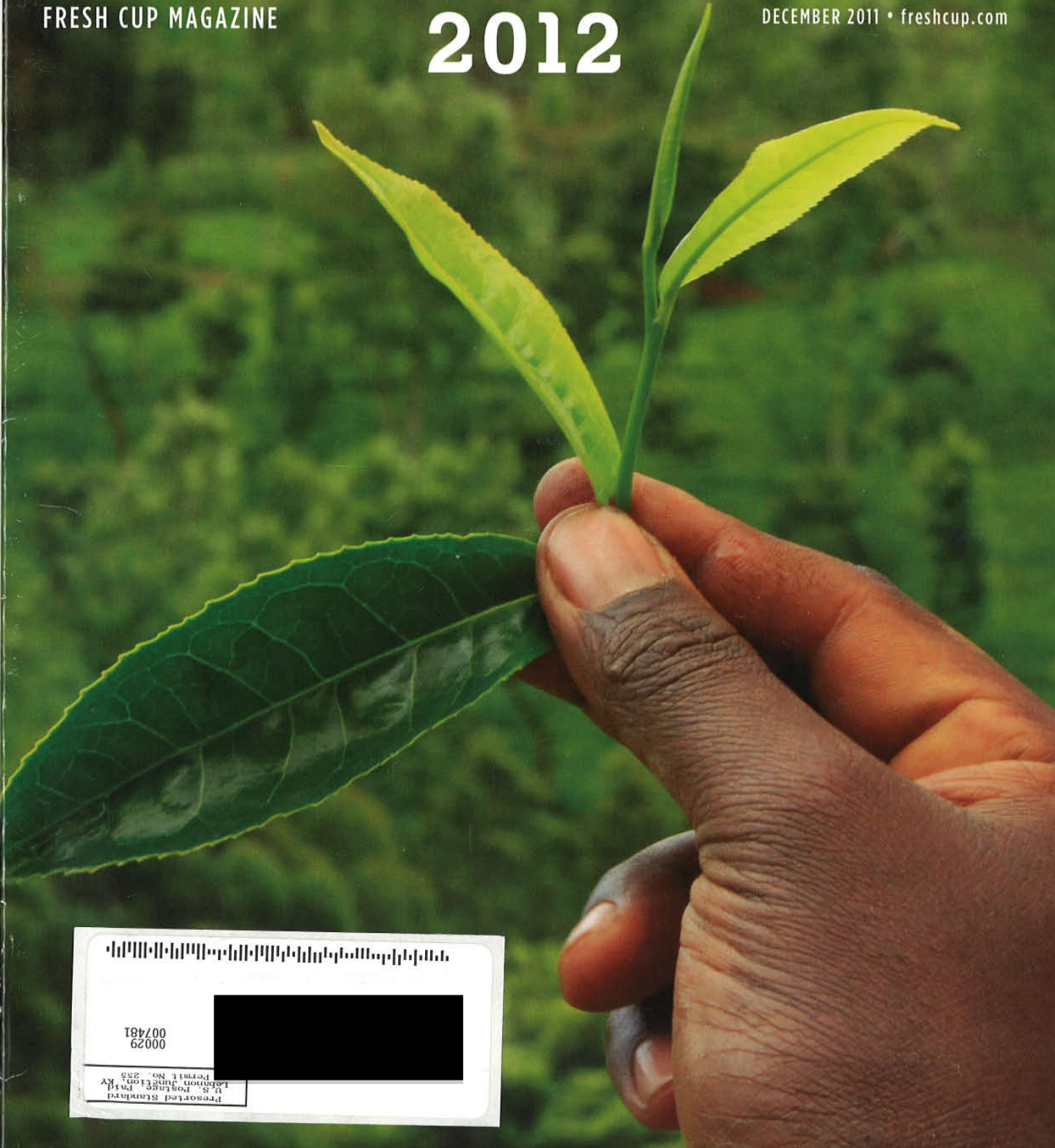


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by
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COMMUNICATING
THROUGH YOUR
TEA PACKAGING

STYLE VS. SUBSTANCE

When New York City-based Tay Tea launched eight years ago with a lineup of hand-blended artisanal teas, owner Nini Ordoubadi had a clear concept for the company's packaging: Make it attractive, but keep it simple. "Our design is beautiful, but more than beautiful, it is lucid," she says. "What I can't stand is extraneous, fringe design. I like to distill things down to the bone and then add a color or word or something particularly beautiful." The solution? Tay Teas are packaged in (usually silver) tins featuring simple white labels with varying colors depending on the tea type, but maintaining the company's teapot logo.

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Designing effective tea packaging can indeed be a tricky task, as the look of a box or bag must address sometimes competing needs. It should have the visual flash to catch the eye of a customer new to the product, but also offer depth and substance that have the potential to convert a competitor's customer. It should appear attractive enough to be selected as a gift, but not so "pretty" that it's seen as impractical for regular use. There may be a desire to create a new look with fresh color palettes and forms, but there also must be a connection to existing product lines, sending a unified message from the company. Packaging should also provide enough information to educate customers, but not so much that it overwhelms.

In short, effective packaging must find the sweet spot of attractiveness and authenticity, turning customers' heads and generating increased sales and brand loyalty. Jenny Kim, art director of Milwaukee-based Rishi Tea, sums it up thusly: "When designing a successful package, we always have to balance the needs for the product to be attractive, informative and practical to the end consumer while also keeping in mind that any package we design must have the proper function to store and preserve the high quality of our tea."

TELLING A STORY

A tea container's look can communicate many things: the company's style, priorities and values, and even the tea's origin. Some tea packaging employs graphics and colors to evoke the essence of the tea's flavor. The packaging of Rishi's Masala Chai product features illustrations of the herbs, spices and tea plants used to make up the blend. "The turmeric-saffron and deep color scheme reflects the richness and uniqueness of chai's South Asian origin," explains Kim.

As consumers have become more educated about tea, there has been more emphasis on where it comes from; effective packaging can capitalize on that interest by including information such as origins, flavor profiles, brewing styles and instructions. But it can be difficult to strike the right balance when it comes to providing info: Adding too much can overwhelm and confuse consumers, but providing too little information will often leave customers wondering if the product is worth their money. "The beverage of tea is subtle and nuanced with very complex flavors," says Peter Hewitt, CEO of wholesaler Tea Forte. "Telling stories about the flavors or where it's from, explaining the quality and what you might connect with it—especially with a hundred other things on the shelf—is a pretty challenging task."

Tea Forte has addressed the information-overload problem by

providing just enough description on its packaging to make it easy for consumers to find out more on their own. "It really isn't necessary to write a whole synopsis on how to make a cup of tea on the tin," says Ordoubadi. "You can send them to a blog or Web site. You whet their appetite to investigate; it's an exploration."

Tea Forte's solution to the issue of trying to cram as much info as possible onto the packaging is to offer several different



VERSATILE-TEA: Tea Forte has several types of packaging depending on what the customer is looking for, including tins and a pyramid infuser (top right).

type of tea-delivery systems and tailor the message to the technique in question. The company offers pyramid infusers filled with blends of whole-leaf tea as well as single-steep packages of loose leaf and canisters of loose tea. "For different occasions, there are different appropriate styles of packaging," says Hewitt. "I can make parallels with clothing. We may wear shorts or jeans, or get dressed up. It's not that dresses are good and jeans are bad, they are just different for different occasions."

IDENTITY AND PRETTINESS

Oftentimes tea packaging will be designed with the gift market in mind. Tea pros say it's often easier to gain notice in that space through the use of packaging that itself looks like a present or that could stand alone on a kitchen counter beside decorative dishes. However, when a product is considered to be very "pretty," there are some risks.

First, there's the danger that the product will be perceived as a gift item exclusively, locking the company out of the more



LINK TO THE SOURCE: Rishi Tea offers a window into where its teas come from with pictures of tea's origins on its packaging.

frequent sales and repeat customers that come along with "everyday use" teas. "It's tough," says Sara Holby, co-founder of Ajiri Tea, a wholesaler specializing in teas from Kenya. "We want our tea to be a special product, but like every company, we want to sell as much as we can." Another potential downside to design-heavy packaging is that the item can be seen as something that, once given, will sit on a shelf because it's seen as something to look at, not to use.

Finally, there is a risk that serious consumers of tea—the ones who spend the most money in the category and have the most influence over others—will think that the flash and style are being used to compensate for an inferior blend in the box.

So how does a tea company avoid being perceived as all style and no substance? It helps to present a clear identity as a brand, using all the aforementioned elements—a clear logo, effective but not dominant verbiage and eye-catching design. It's a model followed by Rishi. "We try to consistently brand our product and make sure that it is recognizable Rishi," says Kim. "A Rishi Tea package should link the consumer to the origin and the inspiration of the tea, so we use cultural and artistic design to give the consumer a feeling of place and of the energy that the tea represents." For Rishi, that concept also expands to the materials used in its packaging, which must contribute to the design while also maintaining freshness. "There is a fine balance that we must always strive to meet," says Kim. "How can we create a package for our natural and organic teas with materials that are eco-friendly? We test eco-friendly packaging that can keep tea fresh and meet with our quality standards."



PERSONAL TOUCH: Ajiri Tea's labels are made from bark cut by women in Kenya, the source of Ajiri's teas.

At Ajiri Tea, Kenya is the focus. Ajiri means "to employ" in Swahili (which, alongside English, is one of Kenya's two national languages), and the company's mission is to create employment for the people of western Kenya. Fittingly, Kenya and its resources are recurring themes throughout Ajiri's packaging: The labels are made using dried bark from banana trees, and the company employs local women to hand-cut the bark and then design unique labels for its different offerings. "I think our package design really communicates the whole mission of what our company is," says Holby. "The labels are handmade by Kenyan women, the tea itself is Kenyan, and I think it's important that we tie it all together. We didn't want a tin that was the same as everyone else's but with a different label on it. We wanted to change the base of the package, and I think it makes our product really stand out."

THE GOLD STANDARD

Design is not simple, and there is not a single design style that will work for every company. Creating a recognizable brand with information-rich material and a sense of quality and depth is the gold standard. As Kim of Rishi Tea says, "We need to think of ourselves as storytellers to create something meaningful to the customer that chooses to drink premium tea." Hewitt of Tea Forte puts it another way: "Tea is an experience, and we have all these different senses—taste, smell, visual, feel, so we experience things in multidimensional ways," he says. "They all matter and need to be taken into account with presentation." ❖