

P.S.

Ice cream tubs

PACKAGING IS EVERYTHING. There are two drinks, one served in a plain, cylindrical, almost wine-shaped bottle, with a plain white label. Another, targeted at the same market segment, is in a squat, decanter-like bottle. The glasswork is a little more intricate, and the label elaborate with burnished gold.

Which is better? Well, blind taste tests say the former, and experts would agree with them (even if you try to confuse them by serving it from its counterpart's bottle!). Yet people buy more of the squat-shaped bottles than they do of the better cylindrical variety, and they pay more for them. Why? Because they are fooled by the packaging.

Or maybe they are not fooled; maybe they just prefer nice packaging, it's simply more important to them to look at, to hold, and to serve from the more attractive bottle than the differential in the taste of the drink. They would rather invest in the presentation than the product because the presentation makes them feel good. It isn't *just* about the taste, perhaps, it's about the whole 'consumption experience'.

Change the product. Take a kilo of ice cream and package it in a rectangular plastic tub and you can charge £2.49. Take exactly the same ice cream and package it in a cylindrical paper container and you can charge £2.59. Why? Something has changed in people's perception of the ice cream which has enabled you to make an extra ten pence of pure profit.

What has changed is an *association*. In this particular case, people associate the cylindrical container with milk churns, cream and butter. The paper container harks back to a bygone age of packaging in which ice cream was rich and creamy and so much closer to the cow and farm that instigated it than the stainless steel surfaces of a modern production plant. People will pay more for that association, for that evocation of tradition, freshness and homeliness. They have been hoodwinked into overpaying by cunning packaging.

But why talk about the abc of marketing strategy? To make the point that packaging is important and is incredibly powerful. People are easily led by it even when the content has not changed. The reason why this is something worth discussing is because it has applications in ecclesial life. Just as the cylindrical paper ice cream tub creates pleasant associations for the consumer, so too the words, styles and practices of ecclesial life can be set up to create particular as-

sociations which can be designed (or have the effect) to attract or repel.

Can you imagine taking a sentence which describes a spiritual truth and 'dressing it up' in a way in which a very 'traditional' ecclesia might express it, and then doing the same exercise in a way in which a 'liberal' ecclesia might express it? It isn't difficult to do because there are trigger words, trigger modes of expression, little telling phrases, even different grammatical structures, which can serve to identify, to create associations, to make people feel comfortable or uncomfortable. And they do this quite apart from the content of what has been said.

It is a fascinating thing to observe and to question. I have caught myself speaking or praying at certain ecclesias and using certain words or phrases that might not normally be in my register. And then I might go to another ecclesia and use different language. I hope the content of what I was saying would always be true, but why should the packaging change? One might do it out of respect for one's audience, I suppose; trying to speak to them in a way in which they would feel comfortable in order to get a message across. Or one might do it for less noble motives: to create an impression of being 'righteous' or of being 'right on'; to be liked; to 'fit in' and be part of the group; to be thought 'sound', or perhaps 'intellectual', or perhaps 'traditional', or perhaps 'free-thinking' (depending on what image one wants to project at the time). It's quite disturbing, isn't it?

Often there is perhaps no real harm in this sort of thing (although I find myself disliking it in myself when I do observe it). But sometimes there can be. Have you ever judged someone to be 'sound' or 'unsound' because of the words they use, when you have no real idea at all what they think about a whole range of issues? How hard do we try to look beyond the surface of the presentation to see what content is really underneath? It's much easier simply to disagree violently, or enthusiastically nod one's head, because of the simple surface 'clues' people give away.

Styles of speaking, choices of words, and the modes of carrying out aspects of our services or conducting our affairs, can be used as identity markers in a way which has more potential for harm and exclusion than it does for good. It is man who looks on the outside and who is fooled by it. God looks beyond this to see what lies at the heart.

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