



concert T-shirt versus an Armani T-shirt says volumes. The same principle holds for someone who wears Seven packaging on the planet. David Becker, the president of Philippe Becker Design in San Francisco, says that people have been concerned about over-packaging and sustainability issues for years: "As organic food goes mainstream, that shows people are concerned about the product within the package. By extension, they are also concerned with what the packaging does to the environment." And this is the challenge that his company tackles: developing new, sustainable technologies and helping clients understand that additional packaging costs associated with new technologies are worthwhile because "packaging is an integral part of what they represent in the customer's eyes." And Becker speaks from experience: his firm helped the American supermarket chain Safeway to develop its own proprietary brand of organic foods and drinks, O Organics, recently praised for its "gorgeously restrained" packaging design by *The Washington Post*.

To discover just how important a role packaging plays in this world, I spoke with Fritz Yambrach, a professor of packaging sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology in the state of New York. Yambrach, who specializes in pharmaceutical and medical device packaging, notes that packaging can have an enormous impact on health. For example, drug companies continually struggle with the fact that patients do not comply with the directions physicians give them on taking their medicine. By failing to take their medicine or taking it improperly, patients can suffer dire effects. In response, drug companies try to use packaging to guide compliance. The classic example of a compliance package is the one designed for the birth control pill, says Yambrach. Each day has a pill assigned to it, and it is easy to see whether or not a pill has been punched out for that day. More recently, packagers are investigating ways to use technology to track compliance. For example, a microchip on the container might record how often you open the packaging to take a pill. When you return to your physician for a follow-up visit, the doctor could access an electronic record to confirm that you have been opening your medicine bottle regularly. "The reason I am involved with packaging is that I believe you can actually improve quality of life by providing products that will enable people to live longer and healthier lives," explains Yambrach. He asserts that huge quantities of food in large cities are thrown out because the food has been beaten up in distribution or

gone bad during storage. "This is true throughout the developing world," says Yambrach. "We can improve the quality of what is produced by using good packaging technology," and it doesn't even have to be cutting edge.

Nonetheless, packaging is moving forward at a rapid pace towards previously unimaginable frontiers. In early August, the Annual DuPont Packaging Awards for innovations in packaging technology recognized a beer can called the Labatt Blue Cold One that uses a patented process to create a thin, high-tech polymer wrap to keep the beer insulated from the heat transferred by warm hands. The result—a can that's more comfortable to hold and beer that stays colder and fresher longer. Other honored innovations included creditcard-sized eye shadows from Cargo ColorCards™, holographic anti-counterfeit lined cartons from The Paper Products Ltd. and Sherwin-Williams' combination paint container and roller tray.

But if packaging is a science, it is also an art. Thus, Jose Cuervo's Reserva de la Familia brand of estate-bottled tequila, aged for an average of three years, is prized among collectors not just for the complexity of its flavor, but also for the wooden box emblazoned with Mexican art in which it comes packaged.

Each year, the Cuervo family commissions a Mexican artist to design a limited edition box for the Reserva tequila (10,000 boxes at over US\$100 a pop). The artist is given nearly complete control over the design, which can be representational or abstract and not necessarily related to tequila. The boxes have become collectibles, and indeed, in early September, one of the 1996 bottles and its box painted by Manuel Velazquez could be found for sale on eBay for US\$750.

Most aspects of our lives are pre-packaged for us, but we still have plenty of packaging choices of our own to make – from how we will wrap a gift (today, you can even personalize the wrapping paper with photos or messages) to the clothing in which we package ourselves. Will we choose to present ourselves swathed in organic cotton or coated in vinyl? Will we choose to slip inside the package of an environmentally sensitive hybrid car or a gas-guzzling SUV? U.S. news commentator Shana Alexander once said, "Letters are expectation packaged in an envelope." What will we use to wrap our expectations in the age of email? ●