

BetterByDesign

And sometimes even for dinner.

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Many American families, including my own, consider cereal a household staple. Our office cereal cabinet is a hot spot for many colleagues to reach for their daily source of fuel. This overlapping popularity is just one exhibition of this product’s lasting nostalgia. Today, cereal aisles are jam-packed with an abundance of options. Cereal lovers are met with a variety of iconic brands, as well as a growing selection of on-trend and limited edition offerings. The variations are seemingly countless as new flavors, coatings, and other assorted inclusions frequent the shelves. Although widely considered a breakfast food, my family–and coworkers–enjoy cereal at any time of the day, sometimes even for dinner.

Cereal is a healthy business. Post, General Mills, and Kellogg’s are dependent on their cereal sales, which comprise a \$10 billion market, according to May 2017 reports from IBIS World. This is a big business, and an even bigger category. In an attempt to satisfy my curiosity, I began counting Wikipedia’s list of cereal brands, but even stopping at 400 did not provide me with the total; and the list was not all-inclusive. This aisle in stores can be 100 feet long and sometimes four to five rows high, and yet it doesn’t overwhelm consumers to the point of deselection. Cereal is beloved to the extent that emerging cereal experiences go beyond the bowl and spoon. Get blasted with a variety of pop-culture nostalgia including comic books, video games, toys, and of course, cereal at Pop Roc in Rochester, NY. If you prefer your own concoctions, visit the cereal bar at Kellogg’s NYC, or choose from their fun menu of cereal related specialties. They even host private events and provide catering!

Advertising and design have been the key levers for the cereal business. C.W. Post shared his wisdom, “The sunshine that makes a business plant grow is advertising,” as he embarked on a career that would earn him a net worth of \$800 million (as of 2016). In 2016, The Atlantic published an article titled, “Why Cereal Has Such Aggressive Marketing.” This story gives reason behind the common belief that breakfast is “the most important meal of the day.” It all started in 1944 with the “Eat a Good Breakfast–Do a Better Job” marketing campaign launched by General Foods with the intent of increasing cereal sales. The article states that during this campaign “grocery stores handed out pamphlets that promoted the importance of breakfast while radio advertisements announced that ‘Nutrition experts say breakfast is the most important meal of the day.’” The article further informs that these types of advertisements were “key to the rise of cereal.”

Despite the historically prominent role of advertising in the cereal industry, there have been no recent changes in innovation nor design to barter for consumer attention. To combat the overwhelming graphics and colors strewn across the cereal aisle, I instinctively tune out until I locate the comforting image of my usual choice. The saturated colors and cartoons are intended to be compelling, yet they create the opposite effect due to the lack of differentiation. The blatant attempt to recreate the design philosophy, claims, and aesthetics of category leaders is mind-boggling. Studies have found that consumers have strong brand loyalty to breakfast foods like cereal. My family is no exception, given their disinterest in straying from our standard rotation of brands. The inevitable sensory overload I endure each trip to the cereal aisle has resulted in a lack of exploration. I have little interest in finding a new brand I may even prefer over my typical selection. I would venture to guess that many other consumers echo my sentiments, which may inhibit growth.

My love for nostalgia does not detract from my thirst for innovation. As we move forward in any category, it is necessary to change and innovate to fit the desire and necessity for growth. Packaging, for example, could certainly be reconsidered given the accumulation of waste in plastic and board. In our increasingly enlightened society, many consumers are drawn to products that adhere to a green ecological footprint. The lack of true category disrupters is disheartening, and there are few recent brands that have attracted my interest. Featured in a 2016 Marketing Week article titled, “Applying the principles of psychology to design,” the British company Dorset Cereals stands out in this crowded category through simplified packaging to promotes its adherence to the slow food movement and highlights its back-to-basic recipe. Void of the expected claims and violators, their packaging concept provides consumers with a “moment of calm,” which hit home for me. From my perspective, the recipe for future success in this category is a combination of comfort and excitement. The current designs using desperate shock tactics have grown stale in a world seeking simplicity, efficiency, and thoughtfulness. Dorset is just one example that is devoid of over-stimulation as their honest quality shines through. If spotted on American shelves, such designs would be the breath of fresh air that would stop me in my usual tracks. This rush of excitement inspired by innovative design is the missing ingredient needed to motivate consumers, tapping into their desire for variety.

