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*Evolution of
Coffee
Labeling*



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Evolution of Coffee Labeling



Modern coffee labeling communicates more than just the flavors contained in a given brand or roast of coffee. Labeling in today's market expresses knowledge of a craft and connects consumers with product origins in innovative ways.

By Rachel Northrop

When consumers purchase a bag of whole bean or ground coffee, sometimes they are looking for just a coffee product, but they are increasingly shopping for something more: coffee plus a set of shared values.

Communicating brand values—centered on health, ethics or precision of craft—without overwhelming and confusing consumers is the delicate line modern coffee labeling must toe.

Jeff Woods, director of sales at Dillanos Coffee Roasters, Sumner, Wash., has worked for years as a consultant to coffee shops and helped develop private-label products. He explains that the experience of selling coffee looks markedly different on the grocery shelves than it does from behind the café bar. “In a coffee shop or café setting it’s appropriate to have lot of information on retail bags because purchasing coffee is part of interactive experience where the barista can explain information. Too much information on [the bags at] the grocery level won’t be effective.”

In both café and grocery environments, today’s coffee labeling offers an abundance of detail and creative design, while still finding ways to give consumers the information they need to make purchasing decisions.

Creating Greater Transparency

Consumers expect to know more about the origins of their food and beverages. PJ’s Coffee of New Orleans, Covington, La., has responded to this shift by replac-

ing product titles like “New Orleans Roast” with geographic identifiers such as “Papua New Guinea.” Felton Jones, PJ’s roastmaster, said that the shift towards highlighting origin coffees is in response to the continued growing trend of educated consumers. “Consumers want to know more about where their coffee comes from. Most coffee drinkers have experienced a wide variety of coffees, but have no clue of their origins. Promoting country of origin creates a distinction between taste profiles.”

Café Imports, Minneapolis, Minn., is a specialty coffee importer whose clients are predominately small to medium roasters preparing coffee for regional shops. Most of the coffees they import are destined to be served as single origins rather than as components in blends. “As access to more microlots increases, so does the demand for the transparency of information about coffee. Our customers want to have a connection to the

products in their lives, especially their coffee,” said Noah Namowicz, Café Imports’ director of sales.

Because consumers want to know the origins of their coffee, labeling is a chance to educate them about nuanced coffee attributes, hopefully creating a market that is inclined to pay more for differentiated and more specialized products.

Jonathan Hutchins is the founder and roaster at William & Son Coffee Company in Porto Alegre, Brazil. “Most people in our part of southern Brazil, which is very European and not a coffee producing region, have never seen a green coffee bean,” he said. “People in our city are already conversant in wine and other gourmet items but specialty coffee is less familiar.”

In order to capitalize on consumer affinity for high-end products, Hutchins highlights what sets the coffees he roasts apart. When consumers are blown away



New York City-based Coffeed highlights the country of origin, region, farm, varietal, process, elevation, roast level and flavors on its packaging.

by his single origins, he focuses on the origin rather than the roast. “I begin conversations with my customers with the premise that 80 percent or more of the flavor in the cup comes from the farmer. Instead of saying that it’s all in the roast profile or the extraction of the espresso, I always say, ‘That marvelous aroma and flavor is the work of Clayton from the Fazenda Ninho da Águia, the hard working farmer who brings us this value.’”

Elements of Coffee Labeling

All coffee is not created equal, and in the past the goal has been to neutralize all of the inequalities that arise from sourcing a variable agricultural crop and promote a homogenized final product.

Labeling has evolved to showcase the

differences among coffees and can include detailed information about roast level, origin—including country, state, town, farm, and elevation—farmer name and back story, varietal, processing method and recommended brewing instructions.

Lon LaFlamme, national sales and marketing manager with Dillanos, noted that this increase in detail is part of roasters’ attempts to “quench shopper’s thirst for more farm-to-table product knowledge.” He said that consumers concerned with the healthiness and quality of their food are craving more than just a claim: they want full traceability.

“Flavor is still more important than name of the farm, but name of farm implies confidence of brand—how much a brand shares makes consumers

feel they can trust that brand,” said LaFlamme.

Woods added, “Without that feeling of authenticity a customer wouldn’t have picked up the bag and had that romantic experience of being curious about the coffee.”

As an importer, Café Imports acts as an intermediary between farmers and roasters and their customers. Today, importers deal in the exchange of information as much as in coffee. “Whenever possible, our goal is to pass along the stories of our producer partners in an attempt to honor all of the hard work they have done to produce an exquisite coffee,” said Namowicz. “At the most basic level, we like to get background information like: farm size, varieties, microclimate, region, micro-region, farmer name, processing and altitude. Whenever possible we then delve deeper into the back story of the farm, its legacy, and the farmers’ hopes for the future in specialty coffee.”

The roster of data shared on a coffee label can tell the stories of many parties, from the farmer through to the roaster. “We went back to our roots at PJ’s and decided to provide our consumer with a wide variety of information on our packaging, including a brief history of the company, an explanation of what to expect in terms of quality and brewing instructions. The more the consumer knows, the more rewarding our efforts become,” said Jones.



Artistry of the Roast

Coffee is a familiar product that consumers associate with the comfort of a routine, but more coffee drinkers are starting to take a moment to consider the artistry that goes into each cup. Labeling is encouraging this trend.

“The Starbucks Roast Spectrum sorts our coffees by three roast profiles Starbucks Blonde Roast, Medium Roast and Dark Roast—so customers can easily find the flavor and intensity that’s perfect for them,” said Erin Shane, communications manager, Starbucks Coffee, Seattle. “In addition to the Starbucks Roast Spectrum,

(Top) Starbucks introduced new packaging for its grocery/supermarket coffee lines in early 2014. (Bottom) Starbucks’ stores’ whole bean coffee packaging was redesigned in mid-2013.

we also include brewing instructions, tasting notes and blend information as well as the story of each coffee on the bag.”

In mid-2013, whole bean coffee sold in Starbucks stores unveiled a new look. “[We] believe each of our coffees is a work of art, and the new packaging reflects the artistry that goes into the contents of each bag,” said Shane.

The labels of Dillanos’ new DCR line of exclusive coffees feature watercolor paintings. “This artistic attention to detail communicates that this is fine product. The reverse of the watercolor tag has additional information that consumers can choose to enjoy—or not,” said Woods.

Creating an Invitation for Interaction with Consumers

Coffee labeling is fundamentally rooted in visual appeal, using color, photography, artistic renderings, certification seals, company logos, maps, and QR codes—coded arrays of black and white squares read by Smartphones as URLs—to invite consumers to interact with the product pre- and post-purchase.

Ryan Knapp, co-founder and director of coffee at Madcap Coffee Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., said that Madcap chose to streamline their retail packaging to focus on the information most relevant to consumers. “Madcap entered specialty coffee at a time (2006) when the specialty coffee industry knew all this information about variety, elevation and processing method; it was almost like a bragging competition of how much information you knew about your coffee,” he said. “[At Madcap,] we



Ryan Knapp, co-founder and director of coffee at Madcap Coffee, in the flagship shop in Grand Rapids, Mich., during *Tea & Coffee*’s visit.

really wanted to focus on what matters to the consumer: “How can I identify this coffee if I want to buy it again?” We went with clear color combinations, so if [consumers] can’t remember the obscure Ethiopian name, [they] can remember that [the packaging is] bright green florescent,” said Knapp.

Elements of labeling can become tactile, further engaging customers. Labeling that is somehow textured and interactive invites the customer to pick up the product and take a closer look. Madcap’s retail coffee bags feature the company logo sewn into a piece of cloth. “Our coffee has a real craft behind it, so the fabric gives the idea of a hand made, detailed thing,” said Knapp.

Stumptown Coffee Roasters’ retail bags feature removable double-sided “coffee cards.” “We first began using bag cards in the mid-2000s as a method to share information. It started with color bars by region to effectively communicate the general profiles customers would experience,” said Eric Hoest, vice president of operations at Stumptown, Portland, Ore.

He added that the card offers the discovery of more information as the customer engages with the packaging. “By starting with color, and then finding out the location, elevation, flavor notes and story through a step-by-step process, the packaging both keeps it simple for the customers who want clarity, while allowing for significant detail about that specific year’s crop,” said Hoest.

LaFlamme of Dillanos believes that the role labeling plays in consumer education is to inform, “but not by forcing information down customers’ throats. Coffee labeling is like the back of cereal box; consumers first start drinking, then they read about details they taste. Packaging should be an invitation to learn more.”

Further Enticing Consumers, Labeling Goes Digital

Today’s coffee labeling invites consumers to continue their coffee education online, where digital platforms indulge consumer curiosity and build a base of informed drinkers.

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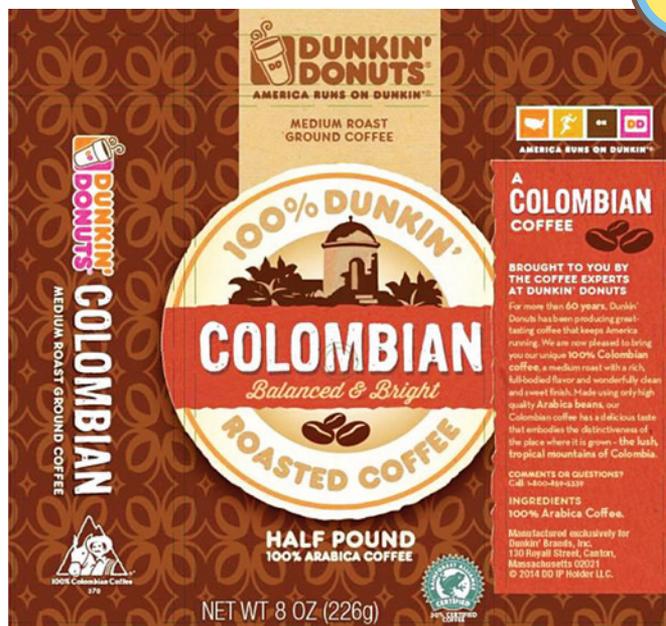
sumer has emerged. Access to technology and information is shaping this consumer, one who is more connected and conscious of the impact caused by the products that he is consuming,” said Moacir Aga Neto, head of new business development, Cerrado Mineiro Coffee Growers’ Federation, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

With the integration of technology, traceability becomes verifiable all the way back to the farm. In Brazil, the world’s largest coffee producer both geographically and by volume, the Cerrado Mineiro region of the State of Minas Gerais seeks to connect consumers directly to the region’s producers through QR codes on bags of roasted coffee. With smart phones and digital technology, coffee farms are only an app away.

“The QR codes are a way to transparently connect the consumer with origin, the grower, his history and the production process behind the coffees,” said Aga Neto.

Hutchins buys coffee from the Cerrado Federation of Coffee Growers for William & Sons, and as a roaster sees the QR codes as an invaluable tool for educating Brazilians about Brazilian coffee. “The scannable QR code is priceless for the learning curve of adult coffee education. Another key factor of origin storytelling is the power of Facebook and Instagram,” he said adding, “my clients love newsfeeds from origin. Farmers send me pictures of microlots growing and being processed. I share this with my clients and they immediately want to buy coffee that is still being processed.”

Café Imports compiles coffee profile information online in



Dunkin’ Donuts new limited edition Colombian coffee features the “100% Colombian Coffee” logo. Roasters and brands authorized to use the logo have signed a valid trademark license with the FNC.

“beanology” coffee biographies. Roasters, shop owners and consumers “can search by keyword, ID number or country. We have media like videos, maps, and high-resolution photos to enrich the beanology experience,” said Namowicz.

Labeling Licenses, Certification Seals & PGIs

Certain labeling vocabulary and logos, like certification seals, can only be used with proper permission. With a continued desire to promote coffee origins, the newest protected labeling vocabulary belongs to regions and countries that protect their products through licensing.

Aga Neto said that in this new coffee world, Designation of Origin products are the answer for the desires of consumers.

“The DOC (Designation of Controlled Origin) seal of the Cerrado Mineiro region gives my clients instant knowledge and authority on their coffee,” said Hutchins.

Colombia has been legally protecting its coffee since the 1960’s using the Juan Valdez logo and the guarantee of “100% Colombian Coffee.” Roasters and brands authorized to use the Colombian Coffee logo have signed a valid trademark license with the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation (FNC), Bogotá, Colombia.

Colombian coffee is further protected as a product of Geographic Identification. In the “Straight from the Cup” column in the March 2014 issue of *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*, Luis F. Samper, chief communications and marketing officer for the FNC stated, “When filed before the United States Patent and Trademark Office, producers and sellers of products using these marks must adhere to the standards set by the mark’s owner.”

Keurig Green Mountain offers a variety of certified, organic, and kosher products. “We have content approval specialists who work closely with our legal, R&D and certification teams to ensure we are providing consumers with the most accurate and helpful information possible for all of our product labeling so the coffee

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they enjoy is consistent and meets their expectations,” said Suzanne Lavery, pre-media and technical compliance manager at Keurig Green Mountain, Waterbury, Vt.

Labeling as a Conversation Starter

Hoest said, “At Stumptown, we have a saying that our coffee is ‘meticulously sourced, intentionally roasted and carefully brewed.’ To intentionally roast a coffee means being thoughtful about what will bring out all the quality in the beans the producers harvested. The best way to find a coffee to enjoy is to either read the flavor notes or ask us and we’ll help out.”

Hutchins has found that it can be tricky “to educate adults, as they don’t want to let you know that they have no idea that coffee is green or that it is a fruit.” Vocabulary of retail coffee labeling in a café setting can inspire dialogue between customer and roaster, comfortably educating consumers.

Woods sees labeling as the beginning of “taking people step-by-step to transition



Stumptown offers detailed “coffee cards” with its bags, but does not indicate the roast level.

them to the level of aficionado where they actually *do* care about all those details that they previously didn’t understand.”

Grocery Labeling Speaks for Itself

Without the support of barista staff at cafés, coffee labeling for grocery settings has to be explicit. “We recently launched our first 12-ounce ground coffee bags in

grocery stores. In the past, PJ’s has solely provided 16-ounce, whole bean coffee, and to this day only sells whole bean coffee at PJ’s coffeehouse locations,” said Jones. “We decided to create a new package design for our 12-ounce ground coffee to differentiate and inform our consumers of the bean-to-ground transformation when purchasing our coffee at grocery stores.”

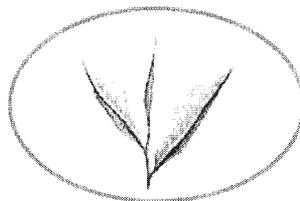


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Woods said that a coffee label can never be a sommelier, but labeling can guide consumers towards a product they'll love.

In February 2014, Starbucks roast and ground coffee sold in grocery stores took on a new look, taking design cues from whole bean coffee sold in Starbucks cafes. Transforming the coffee aisle itself can help shoppers feel more like they are in a café, where they might be more likely to try a new coffee. "Modeled after the look and feel of Starbucks cafés, the Signature Aisle fixtures offer a unique grocery experience that elevates how one shops for coffee. Elements like enhanced lighting, natural wood surfaces, tile back splash, and countertop display bring the coffee section a warm, café-like experience," said Shane.

Working All Packaging Angles

Front, back, side—what goes where? Coffee labeling is a 3D art and choosing what information to include on what surfaces of the package communicates what a brand wants to highlight. Many emerging coffee brands have gone the direction of Ikea, giving their products names and identities rather than descriptive titles.

The fronts of Madcap Coffee's labels feature only a singular electric hue and a name. "We've tucked additional information onto the side label so that people who want to know more can 'geek out' about the coffee, but for us, the important part is to identify the person, farm, or cooperative that produced it," said Knapp.

Tandem Coffee Roasters and Speckled Ax Woodroasted Espresso are specialty coffee roasters in Portland, Maine. Both roast the same Ethiopian Kochere from Café Imports but label their coffees differently. Speckled Ax chooses to highlight the full profile of the coffee on the front of the package while Tandem chooses the more minimalist approach and provides only the name on the front and selected details on the back.

LaFlamme believes that understated only works within a certain niche. "The health food movement associates with craft products, but the same design won't work in traditional grocery settings. Certain labeling can create a subliminal association with authenticity, but only in the in the right environment."

Targeting the Audience

Labeling evolves alongside consumer preference and interest as much as around industry logistics. Sourcing coffee has become fodder for adventure blogs and TV series, and coffee labels attract a new generation of drinkers by appealing with exotic details, while finding ways to still cater to lifetime drinkers who seek the familiar.

The vocabulary and design of coffee labeling can present coffee as a simple

pleasure, an artisan prize and a means of connecting with people around the world. ☕

Rachel Northrop is the author of "When Coffee Speaks: Stories from and of Latin American Coffeepeople," a compilation of interviews with people working along the coffee production chain. Visit: whencoffeespeaks.com for more information and to order copies of the book.



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