

THERE'S A FIGHT GOING ON OUT THERE!

Consumers are arming themselves to the teeth with box cutters, crowbars, steak knives, pliers, hacksaws, scissors and, well ... teeth! Even in one instance, reports *National Geographic*, with a Colt 45! But they're not winning. In a typical year, hard to open packaging sends customers to the hospital, in the USA and UK, an estimated 74,000 times! Although customers don't buy a product for the packaging, the design qualities and the handling and opening characteristics of packaging can play an important role in customer choice. Our experience working with packaging designers - and actually conducting usability tests of packaging with real consumers - suggests that early attention to package ergonomics and usability can make a positive difference to that initial customer experience.

THE MOST HATED INVENTIONS

30% of adults say the cell phone is the invention they most hate but cannot live without, according to the 8th annual Lemelson-MIT Invention Index study. In second place (26%) come alarm clocks, followed by television (23%). Razors, microwaves, coffee pots, computers and vacuum cleaners were also listed as "essential yet despised inventions". Although these products clearly have benefits, they also demonstrate unintended consequences of innovation. "Cell phones have clearly been beneficial in terms of increasing worker productivity and connecting people," says Merton Flemings, director of the Lemelson-MIT Program. "However, the Invention Index results show that the benefits of an invention sometimes come with a societal cost." Thankfully, companies who focus on ease of

use, and on understanding the context in which a product is used, are becoming more aware of the need to design out undesirable side-effects.

THE LOTUS POSITION

Lotus Cars are bucking the "How many more features can we give the customer?" trend, by asking instead: "What can the customer do without?" But they have taken this a step further and - in tune with their long time vision of "simpler, lighter and faster" (does a corporate vision get any easier to understand than that?) - Lotus



offers an option for their Elise and Exige models in which they charge \$250 to *remove* the air conditioning (a weight saving of 20lb).

ARE ANTI-GRAVITY HILLS REAL?

About twenty anti-gravity hills (or "spook hills") exist around the world. They are so called because objects (cars, balls, water etc.) appear to roll up them rather than down them. Explanations from the physical to the paranormal have been proposed, but researchers from the University of Padua, Italy, have recently modeled all known examples, recreating the phenomenon in a controlled lab environment, with no intervention from magnetic, anti-

gravitational, or other mystical forces, and have shown that they are all ... visual illusions. This apparent anti-gravity hill (the right-hand road) pictured near Montagnaga,



Italy, for example, does not increase in elevation as it recedes into the distance. In fact it is a gentle downward slope of about 1%. The powerful illusion is caused by the contours and slopes around it, and in other cases by the location of the horizon relative to the viewer.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Rather a lot, it appears. Psychologists have known for about 20 years that people's names and initials can influence certain life outcomes. For example, Tony is more likely to drive a Toyota, live in Toronto and marry Tonya, than Jack, who is more likely to buy a Jaguar, live in Jacksonville, and marry Jackie. This rather amazing, but nevertheless real, phenomenon is known as the Name-Letter Effect. Now, a series of studies by researchers at the University of San Diego and Yale University, published in the December, 2007, issue of *Psychological Science*, extends the research to the performance domain and produces striking

evidence that people may unconsciously pursue name-resembling life outcomes that are actually negative. Their data show that people whose names begin with C or D are more likely to achieve C and D grades than are people whose names begin with A and B. They are also more likely to go on to lower ranked graduate schools. Baseball statistics between 1913 and 2006 show that batters whose names begin with K are more likely to strike out than other batters (K is the letter used to record a strike-out). In a controlled experiment the researchers found that subjects solved fewer problems when the consolation prize was labelled with their own name initial. In short, the research suggests that "own-name liking" (thought to be a form of implicit egotism) can potentially sabotage success for people whose initials match negative performance labels.

NOTABLE QUOTABLES

"If you take a middle-of-the-road position, you risk getting hit by traffic from both directions."

Margaret Thatcher

"NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT!"

- ◆ The "double-0" designation used by Ian Fleming as a codename for his famous secret agent dates back over 400 years to the reign of Elizabeth I. The two zeroes symbolized eyes and were used to code documents that were intended "For eyes only".
- ◆ *Serge de Nimes*, French for "cloth from Nimes," was first woven in Nimes, France, about 300 A.D. It consisted of a mix of wool and silk. In the late 1600's a similar fabric called *Genes* was manufactured in Genoa. The name eventually became jeans, and *de Nimes* became ... you guessed it!