Convenience is the big one in foods. Consumers want instant meals that simply need to be heated and they want them to taste good. They often want portability – especially at breakfast time. They want easily opened packets (eg Jungle Oats’ new lid) that are resealable so that they don’t have to decant into plastic boxes. “They want to feel” says Vanessa von Holdt of Nampak “that their needs have been taken into account, that their lives have been understood and packaging created to suit them exactly.”

This spills over into increasingly in demand, ‘occasion-based’ packaging. Nampak recently designed a party pack for Versus wine with three 500ml bottles in a stand-up plastic bag that could be used as an ice-bucket. They also came up with the clever little cardboard pocket in which your MacDonald’s chicken fold-over sits. Without it, it would be very difficult to eat.

With their usual insistence on having it all, consumers do not want convenience to detract from the healthiness or freshness of their food. The big news is steaming. Ranges like Woolworths’ Steam Cuisine and McCain’s steam-in-the-bag veg are both doing well. Linked to the emphasis on health is the desire for freshness. Packagers are under a lot of pressure to keep things fresher longer without processing them. Nampak for instance is perfecting the ‘extended shelf life milk’. This stays fresher 50% longer but is still kept in the fridge. It doesn’t undergo the UHT process and therefore is perceived as fresher and better for you.

Another trend driven by consumer demand is smaller pack sizes. This is a result of there being smaller households generally but, in Africa particularly, it’s also a reflection of how much consumers can afford to buy at once. North of South Africa’s borders you can buy single serve toothpaste tubes and 50ml sachets of cooking oil simply because that’s all people can pay for in one go. Here you’ll find strip packs of Frisco and Koffiehuis for the same reason.

Two years ago OMO Washing Powder relaunched with a new, vibrant box that was both scuff and water resistant – no more soggy bottoms. Certainly the cost was higher but so, by the time the project was fully onstream, was their market share. Not all innovations hit the mark of course. You will probably have noticed that the famous, upside down Sunlight dishwashing liquid bottle that actually dribbled all over your shelf has been quietly withdrawn. Andrew Marthinusen, Executive Director of the Packaging Council of South Africa, points to this as a good concept that didn’t work in practice.

Aside from those coming directly from the consumer, some of the biggest influences on today’s packaging are anti-counterfeiting measures. Andrew comes up with the alarming statistic that as much as 8% of world trade is in counterfeit goods and the industry is under pressure to come up with packaging that can’t be copied.

When it comes to attracting the consumer, even something as simple as brighter colours can make a difference.

As for innovations that might be waiting to change our lives. Well, there’s tearable plastic that might relieve the terrible ongoing nightmare that is trying to open sauce sachets, thermochromic ink that can tell you if a drink is cold or hot enough or if a medicine is no longer at the desired temperature, there are even self-heat ing meals that begin to warm up when opened or pill bottles that remind you take the tablets. None of it here yet but, probably only a matter of time.

You may have the best product in the world but if it doesn’t shout ‘buy me’ louder than your rival’s offering, then you’ll have a problem on your hands. Jayne Morgan looks at what’s unfolding in the world of packaging.

Thinking into the BOX