



5 Design Insights For Freshness in Food Packaging

Discovering how consumers think about freshness in packaged foods can unlock opportunities to innovate and grow.

Consumers continue to shift towards “fresher, cleaner, healthier” foods away from the processed foods of past generations. The challenge is how to communicate “freshness” at the shelf when there are just a few seconds to get noticed and make an impact.

It’s no easy task; dialing into “freshness” is about a matrix of attributes such as the quality and integrity of the food, the food purity, how the food has been “processed”, its provenance, time, the way the food has been put together, where in the store you find it, and the story being told about the food. Consumers rarely gauge these attributes the same way, it can be very segmented. The solution to unlocking freshness may lie in understanding how hard your package needs to work to communicate these attributes in a believable, understandable, and real way.

I believe there are five core package design factors worth considering as you try to unlock freshness and develop new opportunities to innovate and grow;

1. What does the package communicate about the transformation of the food (at the factory)?

Consumers have negative and positive freshness package memories and associations in their minds about the look and feel of the whole package. These impressions have been formed by existing products in the market, experiences, and triggers that have strong cognitive associations (think about what you associate with fresh baked bread for instance).

Ask yourself "what does the package communicate about how the food was made"; if the response generates memories and associations of heavily processed food, or large industrial processing, or mechanical chickens its probably the right time to rethink. The package needs to trigger positive category memories and associations that are cognitive triggers for freshness or avoid negative triggers.

Get it right and its possible to completely transform the category and consumer perceptions. Great examples of this are baby food in pouches, or orange juice in clear carafes. Often disrupting packaging norms can dramatically change consumer perceptions.

But tread carefully, *a dog is a dog no matter how it's dressed up*. You might not be able to dilute these consumers associations behind the veil of new graphics and branding. It is the whole package that counts.



2. What does the package communicate about the quality and integrity of the food inside

? Packaging has to really showcase the food to enable consumers to experience and decode the freshness of the food inside. Consumers examine the cut, color, texture, quality, presentation, appearance, and processing perceptions of the food, and compare with "fresh" associations imprinted in their brain. Is the carefully folded sliced meat trend in packaged deli meats a coincidence or is it because there is a positive association from the deli counter?

From a design perspective, the trick is to create solutions that enable consumers to quickly and easily assess the quality and integrity of the real food at the store shelf, and be left in no doubt about its freshness. Visual access is thus really important.

Next time you visit the grocery store, ask yourself how any package is helping you to really see, feel, or smell the freshness of the food inside. You'll probably be left disappointed. All too

frequently, the food is hidden by elaborate graphics; the product remains largely invisible; there are tiny dark windows; and the fake product photography dominates the visual impression.

3. How does the food itself convey freshness? The most fundamental insight is that “you can't fake it”. The food has to be right and no package can really make up for food that doesn't fit with consumers understanding of “freshness” in that product category. It has to look and feel fresh and real.

Food that appears over-processed, heavily preserved or missing fundamental “fresh food” cues will be interpreted by consumers that way. It's where many companies make mistakes; they re-brand, develop new “fresher” graphics, add a window, and tweak formulations, and yet fail to understand how the visual impression of the food can make or break a consumer's interpretation.

4. The package is a reflection of the food inside. Consumers largely are skeptical about claims or don't see all the information on packaging whether it is the carefully dressed food photography, the banners announcing the freshness of the food, or the intricate messaging splashed across the package. All of this branding on the packaging contradicts consumer memory associations for freshness, erode consumer's perception of freshness, and remind consumers of “over-processed” foods.

Consumers expect “fresher” foods to be far simpler and cleaner visually, not only so they can see the food in the package, but because it reflects the simplicity and purity (and freshness) of the food. Less is more.

5. Put the full proposition together. Sometimes "all" the fresh packaging in the world will struggle to elevate freshness perception if it's by a brand strongly associated with processed food, sold in a location at the store anchored in processed food, date coded into the next century. The package freshness perception is an important element but not the only element in getting the proposition right.

The important message to take away is that through good consumer research you can understand the contribution of all elements of your package design to your target consumers freshness perceptions and attitudes. If you understand this better, you design better and improve your odds of market success

Simon Gainey, founder of Hardworking Packaging (HWP) LLC, a firm dedicated to making your packaging work harder for your consumers, customers, and business.