



Dialing It In

Understanding How Consumers Want to 'Dial' Into Freshness

By Simon Gainey

One of the most important elements of consumer packaging research is to understand what aspects of packaging consumers “dial” into to help them make judgments and decisions about products. This is particularly important in a retail environment. With a few seconds to consider the mass of brands in any aisle section, consumer perceptions are, in part, formed quickly by the way packaging communicates to them.

Understanding the contribution of all elements of the package design (graphics and structure) to consumer perceptions and attitudes can thus eliminate guesswork, opinion, and conflicts and help create a “consumer-centric” design focus. Think about it: If I am looking to ensure that consumers believe the premium-ness of my product (and its premium pricing), it is imperative that I do everything to make it believable, understandable, appealing, and relevant. Saying “New, Premium” may just not be enough to help consumers really believe in the product. Therefore, whether I position my product as premium, or pure and natural, or natural/organic, or “fresh,” or whatever the right brand positioning is, it is critical that all the elements of the packaging are working together towards a consistent, authentic message.

Keying on food freshness

As consumers continue to shift towards “fresher, cleaner, healthier” foods, one emerging area for packaged food companies is the importance of package design in communicating “freshness” in a way that truly resonates with consumers. It is no easy task. Freshness plays off of many aspects of the food and the story we tell about the food. The term covers food’s quality and integrity, its purity,



its provenience, its age, and the way it has been produced. Consumers are not easily fooled either; they have a strong healthy skepticism about “freshness” claims plastered across food packaging, and are using many more indicators to help them quickly assess the freshness (quality and healthiness) of packaged food.

So how do consumers use packaging to help them make judgments about “freshness”? While it is difficult to generalize consumers’ attitudes and perceptions across all of packaged foods, there are some interesting design considerations that food manufacturers should consider as they try to dial into today’s food trends.

It’s all about the food! You have to have the food credentials. The first and most fundamental insight is: “It is foolish to fake it!” The food has to be “right” for the consumer, and no package can really make up for food that does not fit with consumers’ understanding of “freshness” in that



Of all the product attributes that a food package must communicate, freshness is by far the most important.





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product category. It has to look fresh, taste fresh, and feel fresh. Food that appears over-processed, heavily preserved, or missing fundamental “fresh food” cues will be interpreted by consumers that way. This is where many companies make mistakes; they rebrand, develop new fresher graphics, and tweak formulations yet fail to understand how the visual impression of the food can make or break consumers’ interpretations.

I’ve seen many unsuccessful chilled “fresh” ready meals enter the market with products that look no better than frozen; the vegetables look heavily chopped and processed, the meat undistinguishable, and the carbohydrate mushy and mealy. Everything about the product presentation sends consumers the wrong signals and may be interpreted as “no better than frozen.” At the end of the day, the package is really communicating and supporting the inherent quality and freshness of the food inside. Without that food, it is a fake that consumers will see through quickly.

If you have the food, flaunt it! Packaging really has to highlight the freshness of the food to enable consumers to experience the fresh attributes of the food inside the package. If you think about it, this consumer perception comes from all the positive freshness benchmarks in the market from fresh fruit and vegetables, fresh meat, fresh dairy, and fresh bread. They essentially deliver a fresh sensory experience—through sight, smell, and touch—often devoid of any packaging. Consumers use these experiences to dial into the freshness of packaged food.

From a design perspective, the trick is to create solutions that enable consumers to assess quickly and easily the quality and integrity of the real food at the store shelf and to have no doubt about its freshness. Consumers need to be able to see and inspect the food and get a good feel for the package contents.

Next time you are in the grocery store, ask yourself how any package is helping you to really see, smell, or feel the freshness of the food inside (whether it’s a pasta sauce, a cookie, grilled chicken, or a ready meal). You will probably

In designing packages for food, less is more. Avoid elaborate graphics that can get in the way of consumers’ “memory presets” for food freshness.

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

The package is a reflection of the food inside! Consumers are often skeptical about 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 presets” for freshness, erodes consumers’ perception of freshness, and reminds consumers of “over-processed” foods.

We often hear consumers talk about that the fact that the “package is a reflection of the food inside”; they expect “fresher” foods to be far simpler and cleaner visually, not only so they can see the food in the package, but also because it reflects the simplicity and purity—and freshness—of the food. Less is more in the case of dialing into freshness. The message should be to simplify and eliminate and let the food do the talking.

Avoid creating reasons to disbelieve! Consumers have negative and positive freshness package memories in their minds, not only graphically but also structurally. These impressions have been formed by existing packaging in the market, experience with other products, or iconic packages that have strong associations. It would be a rare consumer who would argue steel cans dial into freshness, for instance. Consumers have created strong memories that food in cans equal over-processed, manufactured foods with lots of preservatives.

When beverage companies launched fresher purer/lower-processed juices recently, it was no surprise that they chose juice carafe packaging over conventional aseptic brick packaging. Consumers would have found the brand claims unbelievable in brick packaging. Over-processed design

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noble heritage in French label design. One need only think of the famous portico of the Margaux estate which has graced its magnificent Bordeaux labels for generations.

On the Delicato, the use of an emblem—as opposed to the Châteauneuf's heraldic shield—is more of an exercise in flat organizational propaganda, trying to reach consumers who will endorse (and possibly pay a premium for) the notions of sustainability as linked to enterprise, the good life, and family values. The simple flat color zones, the restricted use of words and low number of font types keeps the visual clutter to a minimum, although the overall effect is reminiscent of the composition of a Campbell's soup can.

By comparison, the Little Penguin has fewer than half the number of words on the French label and is suffused with high contrast colors, swirling background patterns, a quasi-realistic depiction of the Antarctic bird, and a somewhat “primitive” quality to the typography of the brand name. While the visual information is far richer and more engaging, there is hardly any information to go by—only source, vintage, and alcohol content.

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styling can also signal heavily processed foods. Consumers can struggle with everything from square, efficient looking packaging, angularity and sharpness, packaging that appears uncared for, over-packaging, or heavy and thick materials. Consumers cannot see beyond these design elements because of what they mean to them.

These are just a few design considerations that help drive consumers' perceptions. The “theater in the store,” the location of product in store, the story behind the food, the brand, and the product category are a few more factors that help to drive consumer perceptions. These associations can vary across consumer segments and across different product categories; however, in developing a fresher proposition, the essential

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and PET. It can also run folding carton and label materials such as heat-sensitive, pressure-sensitive, and in-mold labels. Applications include specialized items such as plastic bags, multi-layer packaging, aluminum container lids, blister packs, and more

The :Dotrix is called Modular because it also offers the option to integrate analog and flexo stations inline with the

So why are such simple motifs (and simply named brands) dominating the sales figures? Some semiotic themes suggest themselves: these bold and bright labels break through the noise at shelf by simply advancing (in an optical sense) faster than a black and white or low contrast printed label like Delicato's. They also reward contemplation from an aesthetic, as opposed to an informational, point of view. Which is to say, they build a mood or a frame of mind. And for the consumer who is neither a gourmet, a wine connoisseur, nor Agent 007, this lightheartedness seems to give permission to the consumer to enjoy the process of experimentation and education.

It is an established neuroscientific fact that words deactivate emotional perception. Designers should heed this lesson well, and move more boldly toward clearly iconic and indexical cues. Open up your semiotic toolbox and map out the meaning and content of the competition—block out the themes in your space (animal, object, pun), chart the colors, and map them against a few quarters of sales data and you will have a clear idea of the meanings that drive consumer interest. Your messaging can be precisely aligned with your label graphics, wringing every ounce of neural association to your identity. ■

element is to understand how package design and styling elements contribute to consumer perceptions and why.

The important message to take away, however, is that through research you can understand the contribution of all elements of your package designs to your target consumers' perceptions and attitudes. If you understand this better, you will increase your chances that you will maximize the contribution of packaging to consumers' experience, their purchase intent, and overall satisfaction. ■

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digital stations, as well as virtually all existing finishing options from the flexo world. This inline flexo option offers the ability to use primer when required and to print special in-house colors or special inks like gold, metallic and fluorescents, as well as high density white and varnish.

EFI's Skelly observes that while inkjet label presses are achieving speeds that satisfy the needs of packaging lines, equipment for flexible packaging has a way to go before inkjet achieves the necessary speeds to displace flexo. His final word, though, is: “They will someday.” ■