



# Farm to Fork: The Complicated Role of Produce Packaging

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In the fresh produce industry, where products are perishable, food safety is critical, margins are tight, regulations are abundant, retailers are demanding, in-store conditions are cold (you hope), wet and sometimes foggy, and product must remain within the confines of a refrigerated display that can obscure the very information shoppers need to see, the challenges to creating the perfect package are considerable.

The packaging development and production process—from strategizing the messaging and product name, to ensuring legal compliance, procuring or engineering the type of packaging that works for your operation and your retailers, conceptualizing the design and overseeing production—is full of choices that can make or break a successful product introduction or refresh.

It would be impossible in one, or even a series of articles, to discuss all the decisions

that need to be made, but below we discuss a few areas on which to initially focus for saving time and money, meeting regulatory and compliance requirements, and designing packaging that works well for your operations, retailers and shoppers. In a future article, we'll focus on design factors to make your brand and products stand out as shopper—and retailer—favorites. But first things first.

## STEP ONE: NAMING AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Assuming your innovation team has already identified the potential new product (or product line), a good place to start thinking about your packaging is doing a competitive analysis and intellectual property search.

Unless there would need to be a major capital outlay for custom equipment and facilities construction, or if the product viability is highly speculative, you'll want to begin

research and packaging design early-on, rather than being rushed at the end—which is how costly mistakes happen.

Before getting too far into the product naming and packaging design process, you or your marketing agency can do a preliminary search of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) online Trademark Electronic Search System (TESS, which can be accessed at <http://tmsearch.uspto.gov>) for basic information on trade names and trademarks that are already registered and therefore unavailable. If a name or mark is unavailable within one Standard Industrial Code (SIC) category, that doesn't mean it's unavailable in others, so pay attention to this detail as well as whether a trademark is live or dead.

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Google is also a good early source to identify if a potential name is in use and what domain names might be available for a future website for the product (you might want to buy some names now—they're cheap). These are good places to start and can help rule out names you are considering, but they do not assure that your choice will be available. Thus, we strongly recommend engaging a knowledgeable, experienced intellectual property or trademark attorney early on in your process (especially since trademark registration alone can take more than 6 months).

This article addresses domestic issues only. Most countries have their own requirements for intellectual property protection and food labeling, and you'll want to find an attorney or other expert in each country of intended or unintended distribution (remembering that sometimes your distributors may be selling into foreign countries without your knowledge).

## STEP TWO: WHAT IS THE COMPETITION DOING?

If your new offering is a type of product that already exists, gather samples of current competitor products from all potential channels: supermarkets, super centers, club stores, online retailers, C-stores, etc. This is important for you, your agency and packaging company to understand case/pack sizes in use, along with design considerations.

Ask your packaging suppliers for advice and samples of what they're doing for others. Suppliers may be under confidentiality and nondisclosure agreements, and whether or not they're willing to provide you with samples could be extremely helpful, and could also factor into your decision about which supplier is a good partner for you.

Proceed purposefully when making decisions: Sometimes the best strategy is to be totally different and unique with your branding, product naming, packaging sizes and shapes and graphic design—to stand out in a considerable way. In other situations, it might be smarter to innovate moderately yet remain similar with what the category is already doing to provide a sense of familiarity and easy wayfinding for shoppers based on what they are already purchasing.

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Look at what other categories are doing too, both inside and outside the produce department and food marketing. Innovative ways to stand out are inspired by thinking differently and pushing past the status quo. To encourage break-through thinking and design, at Moxxy we like to ask ourselves, "What would we (or our clients) NEVER do?" We then challenge ourselves to turn those preconceived "nevers" into "what ifs," and with a bit of tenacity and imagination, "OMG, wow!" ideas and designs that work.

## STEP THREE: SWEAT THE DETAILS

Before an effective marketing package can be designed, there are important operational and production questions to consider. Drilling down specifically into packaging production, the choice of materials determines how bags, tags, labels and cartons are printed, and can greatly affect printing quality and presentation of your brand. Each printing process utilizes a different set of colors and inks, so if specific colors in your branding are essential, your

corrugated carton might not match your film-based bag which might not match your clamshell labels or your sales materials.

Since your packaging will be your silent salesperson on the retail shelf or case, reproduction quality is an important concern. If you're developing a premium product, it needs to have a premium look. This doesn't always mean higher cost, although sometimes it does, but it does mean a thorough understanding of the packaging production

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**Josie's Chopped-This bag design stands out on the shelf, while the product identification colors are familiar to consumers**

process and appropriate choice of materials. If you want to use photographic images on your packaging, especially if they'll be in color, this too will affect the choice of printing process, and therefore materials.

If you're doing a wet/iced field-pack, you need a waterproof carton. Some of the newer plastic corrugated materials allow for better color reproduction than using a waxed carton (even if you lay-down white on the kraft color to help the ink colors pop).

If the product is organic, do the packaging materials convey the appropriate brand image? For example, if you are packing organic strawberries, would a film-sealed box made of recycled paper and wood products, or a clam shell made from recycled post-consumer polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic be a more appropriate option than a virgin PET clam shell?

If you want to encourage retailers to further promote your brand by using your cartons as a display, they should be designed as a Display Ready Carton (DRC) and that can affect your production operations, choice of materials and cost. This approach, while creating additional sales opportunities, also requires visual design considerations so the bags, trays or clamshells inside the carton work well and complement the exterior design of the carton, which relies on a different printing process.

Other details to consider when selecting packaging materials include regulatory and retailer requirements. What nutrition and regulatory disclosure statements (e.g. country of origin and ingredient lists) will be required, where do they need to appear and how

big must they be? If you'll be distributing internationally, especially to Canada, is the printing area large enough to accommodate all messaging and details in both English and French? Perhaps that idea you have for a mini-pack is just not logistically possible. From a retailer perspective, can their distribution centers and materials handling equipment accommodate your choice of package? Do they have a preference for location of the universal product code (UPC) and/or price look-up (PLU) code?

Now that you have addressed product name, trademark and physical packaging design issues, you and your marketing agency can focus on visual design considerations that will help complete the field-to-fork supply chain and move your product from the shelf to the shopping cart.

#### **STEP FOUR: GET COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE**

If you want to disrupt the product category or build a break-through brand or product line, now or someday, get comfortable with taking risks with your marketing—including packaging design. Don't just get comfortable, get excited about it.

It may feel uneasy to zig when everyone else is zagging, but if during the design process you're excited, that's good. But if you're excited and a bit uneasy, even better. As a leader, if your team is asking if you've lost your mind, because the design you chose

seems a little "out there" and that makes them nervous, then you may be about to make the best decision ever.

Whether with your packaging design, your brand strategy or your tactical approach to marketing a new product, people (shoppers) like novel, new and different. They also like an authentic story, consistently good quality, easy to find ingredients, easy to read wording (larger fonts), added value such as meal tips and recipes to make their busy lives more manageable, easy-open containers, recyclable containers, reusable containers, visibility to see the product inside the packaging, coupons, country of origin info, website address, non-GMO, organic, and more and more and more.

Food labeling requirements, nutrition panels and regulated marketing claims aside, part of getting comfortable is about becoming confident in knowing what is brand-appropriate to exclude from your packaging, and what is genuinely essential to include because it will make a true difference for your core audience's satisfaction, brand preference and loyalty.

Packaging that's cluttered because you couldn't decide which messages to exclude or that has a design that tries to please everyone, is a liability not an asset. It takes courage and sometimes endurance to fight for the simplicity and streamlined messaging in which you believe.

#### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

As you can see, designing the perfect packaging requires a lot of forethought and planning, but at the retail level, this effort will be rewarded with increased sales and can determine the success or failure of your products. In our next article, we'll share some thoughts on using words, pictures and design on your packaging to speak to and connect with shoppers. **ce**



**Muzzy Cartons-No question about what's inside this carton.**