Package design for a new consumer product is as important as the product inside. This article will present a brief roadmap for designing the package for optimum effectiveness.

Ideally the package designer will be a professional with strong consumer products experience. Except for the product itself, there is nothing more important to a product’s success than having a hardworking, truly sales generating package. If the package is not designed right, the trade will never buy the product and the consumer will never try it.

The first section of this article reviews a typical Design Process. The second section offers some basic Packaging Design Tips.
Here’s a typical Design Process. It is important to use a step by step organized approach to develop packaging design. Among other things, it helps to define which steps are client responsibilities and which are responsibilities of the design firm.

1. The first step in the process is for the client to describe the assignment to the design firm, assemble all relevant information and materials, list product benefits and key points in their priority of importance and clarify any mandates. A “mandatory” is something that is required for the category or company. A “category” example would be the legal way a product should be described. A “company” example could be that the company president doesn’t like the color red. That means that the designer won’t use red!

2. The second step is for the design firm to prepare a proposal for the client. The proposal should include the designer’s understanding of the assignment and responsibilities, and how the designer plans to execute the assignment, spelling out deliverables, timetables and costs for each module or phase in the process.

3. The third is the most important step in the design process and it has nothing to do with graphics. The client and/or the design firm must develop a Communications Strategy that includes a strong USP - Unique Selling Proposition - (sometimes referred to as a Brand Positioning or the Brand Essence) as well as specific design direction for the specific project. The USP gives the trade and consumer a clear understanding of what makes your product different and better than your competition. There is nothing more important to the designer than to have a clear, powerful Brand Positioning to execute.
A Brand Positioning Formula

Unique or Preemptive*
What is different about your product or service? In what ways is your offering different from your competition?

Relevant
Among those things that are different about your product or service, what differences are relevant? What is the most important unique attribute to your prospect target market?

Believable
Is your claim (your product/service difference) believable to your target prospect? Is it reasonable to think that your company can produce/offer this product or service?

Performable
Can you prove your claim? Does your product or service perform as claimed?

* For lack of uniqueness, consider preemptive. Among the most important category benefits of your product or service, which one is not now being claimed by the competition and is, therefore, possible for you to preempt?
The Design Process

Packaging Design - Brand Identity

For a new product, the next step in the Packaging Design Process is to create a graphic identity or logo.

Typically, the design firm will offer a number of on-strategy options. The client and design firm will select a preferred option and the designer(s) will make any revisions. Finally, upon approval of the design, the design firm will prepare electronic mechanical art files that will allow the logo to be used in packaging, business cards, POS, etc.
The Design Process

Packaging Design - Concept and Graphics

The next step in the design process is to design the consumer package.

Copywriting
Usually, the client supplies the design firm with package copy (text). But sometimes the design firm writes the package copy and the client edits. This latter approach is preferred as it encourages the design firm to get close and personal with the product.

Design Concepts
Next, just like the logo process, the design firm creates multiple on-strategy design concepts for review.

Consumer Research
At this stage, it is prudent to seek consumer input. Focus groups, mall intercepts and on-line surveys are all appropriate research methods for helping select the most relevant concept.

Design Revisions
A concept is selected, and revised if desired.
The Design Process

Packaging Design - Concept and Graphics

Legal Approvals
It is the client’s ultimate responsibility to obtain legal approval for all text and graphics, including securing trademarks and registrations of names and logos. A professional design firm that specializes in consumer products understands these legal issues and can help a client avoid costly and time consuming pitfalls.

Photography/Illustration
If photography or illustration is required, the design firm will recommend a photographer or illustrator. It is the design firm’s responsibility to supervise the photographer’s or illustrator’s work.

Printer Selection
Normally, the design firm recommends several printers for consideration. The design firm and client review the printers and make a selection.

Art Files for the Printer
Finally, the design firm prepares electronic art files to the printer’s specifications and delivers them with a full color printout to the printer.
Once the package design is approved, the design firm will design the shipping case - and for products sold in club stores, the tray.
The final step in the Packaging Design Process is for the printer to use the designer’s art files to create color separations and plates. The printer will prepare a proof for approval by the design firm and the client.

CAUTION: a final design should not be approved based only upon a review of a PDF. It is critical that the client and designer receive a physical printer’s proof of the package or label. A PDF is simply not accurate enough.

Upon approval, the package will be printed.

Typically, the entire logo and packaging design process takes from 12 to 18 weeks.
Packaging Design Tips

Here are a few packaging design tips. They’re simple and very basic but frequently overlooked by even the largest consumer products firms.

Two Critical Target Audiences

– The Buyer –

– The Consumer –

The first tip is to remember that the package must sell two critical target audiences: the trade (the buyer) and the consumer. As you may have discovered, the buyer has become increasingly involved in the design of packaging these days - even for well known national brands!
The shopper gives you 5 seconds, 5 feet from the shelf.

Pushing a cart down the aisle, the shopper gives a product 5 seconds 5 feet from the shelf. That’s not much time to make an impression and places a premium on legibility. Even when he picks up the package, he rarely reads even half of the text.

It’s not important that the package looks great in the conference room. It has to excel in the store in 5 seconds 5 feet from the shelf. That’s the 5 and 5 rule.
Packaging Design Tips

Consider the Selling Environment

Be aware of the selling environment in which the product will be competing for attention. Marketing a frozen product is especially challenging as the product is frequently displayed behind a misty door.

This is good evidence why a package design shouldn’t be approved in the office. Take the best package concepts to the store and put them on the shelf. Make the final approval there.

The club store presents an entirely different challenge. Here the Marketing Manager may find that the beautiful package the company spent thousands of dollars creating is lying on its side and/or partially obscured by the lip of its tray. In club stores the tray is frequently more important than the package for communicating the brand and message.
Here is an example of how the club store disadvantage can be turned into an advantage. Welch’s® trays on the pallet have been graphically linked into one dramatic and dominant image to maximize appetite appeal and impact in the aisle.
Shapes Attract the Eye

Here’s a simple tip. Shapes, like circles, ovals, ribbons, rectangles and squares, attract the eye more than text and are more memorable. Here you see an early DEVINA® label (top) with an all text logo and a more recent label (bottom) using a rectangular form. Even with just this slight difference, notice how one’s eye gravitates to the form.
The Himalayan Salt™ label takes the “shapes attract” concept further. In developing the brand logo, the designer has created a mountain icon shape inside a shield shape. Even competing with a strong photo image, the logo catches the eye, building memorability and brand equity.
Avoid Pretty and Cute

A successful label must work at the shelf. For example, a script or cursive font can be difficult to read...remember the 5 and 5 rule. As attractive as a light or script font may be in the conference room it must succeed in the store where visibility is usually less than ideal.

Sometimes we designers get too wound up in our craft. Remember that the product is hero, not the design. The objective of the design is to execute the product strategy and not reflect a designer’s particular style.
"Less is more" in any communication

Possibly the most important tip applies to all communications – advertising, design and PR. Seek Simplicity. Less is more in any communication. The more points the package tries to make, the less likely any one point will register.

Cascadian Farm® does a nice job with a long line of products...a clean package with a limited number of elements and simple color coding to differentiate products.
Packaging Design Tips

Seek Simplicity

And in the frozen seafood section, Sea Cuisine™ clearly delivers the brand name and differentiates the product varieties – even behind a misty door!
You gotta Love Legibility. One helpful legibility rule is that it’s easier to read a combination of upper and lower case text than all upper case, particularly with long words.

Another simple legibility rule is to use light lettering on a dark background and dark lettering on a light background. Here Golden Blossom® does both successfully on one label.
Here’s a before and after example that demonstrates the legibility issue. In the original Sable & Rosenfeld label on the left, script fonts and dark text on a dark background made the label difficult to read. The new improved label on the right reduces the amount of script font, tightens the brand name into a type of logo and uses white lettering on a dark background. The new label appears to have been designed by a professional since it is also legal - having included appropriate net weight information.
Embrace the Tried and True

Appetite appeal always works

Don’t be reluctant to Embrace the Tried and True. The package designer doesn’t always need to “reinvent the wheel.” For example, appetite appeal always works in food packaging.

With a long line of products, Stouffers® does a fine job of differentiating them through simplicity of format, a limited number of elements, clear product descriptions and “makes me hungry” food photography.
Packaging Design Tips

Embrace the Tried and True

And this Legal Sea Foods® package embraces the tried and true by featuring a strong brand logo while also delivering significant appetite appeal.
The final packaging design tip is that you need professional help to create a professional sales generating package. You’re probably not going to spend a lot of advertising dollars and you can’t count on Twitter® and Facebook® to drive people to the store looking for your product.

Your package at the shelf is your most important communications medium.

Just because a friend or family member knows how to use Photoshop, doesn’t mean that person knows how to design a hard working, sales generating, legal package that appeals to both the buyer and consumer.

See a professional and get the job done Wright.

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Wright Design Specialties
Developing brand identities and logos, package design, websites, and collateral materials. We are especially successful at developing new identities and packaging for start-up brands, creating upscale private label products and developing successful packaging for club stores.
Brand Appendix

Green Giant® is a registered trademark of General Mills Inc, Minneapolis, MN
Welch’s® is a registered trademark of Welch’s, Concord, MA
Divina® is a registered trademark of FoodMatch, Inc., New York, NY
Cascadian Farm® is a registered trademark of Small Planet Foods, Inc., Sedro Woolley, WA
Golden Blossom® is a registered trademark of John Paton, Inc., Doylestown, PA
Stouffer’s® is a registered trademark of Nestlé USA Inc., Solon, OH
Legal Sea Foods® is a registered trademark of Legal Sea Foods LLC, Boston, MA
Himalayan Salt™ is a trademark of Himalayan Salt Company, Shrewsbury, MA
Sea Cuisine™ is a trademark of High Liner Foods, Inc., Danvers, MA
Sable & Rosenfeld is a brand of Sable & Rosenfeld, Toronto, Ontario, Canada