

# In P-O-P, Pictures Worth a Thousand Purchases

## Package Research At The Point-Of-Purchase

By William J. Hruby and James Sorensen

With more than 5,000 new SKUs on the grocery-store shelf every year, existing brands and new products find it more and more difficult to gain trial. Today, the package can be the pivotal factor in a product's success or failure.

*Packaging plays many different roles:*

- *communicator*
- *transporter*
- *container*
- *protector*
- *instructor/educator*

Packaging plays many different roles: communicator, transporter, container, protector, and instructor/educator. Perhaps a package's most important role is to sell the product and build the brand's image -- first on the shelf and later at home. Simply by being on the shelf, a package generates millions of advertising impressions. If it is noticed and communicates the product's reason for being, the package can be as effective at driving trial and building brand image as an advertising campaign, and at a far lower cost.

### Maximum Shelf Impact

Creating shelf impact helps maximize a brand's chance for success, but more than being noticed is required. A bottle of salad dressing with a hot pink label may have impact, but will consumers buy it? Generally, to improve shelf impact, a package needs to look different from the other items in the category. Color most commonly is used to distinguish a product (Healthy Choice green), but a unique package structure can also be effective (Arizona Iced Tea).

Study the shelf impact of competitors before trying to improve your own. You may already be the winner, but keep an eye on private label and smaller brands seeking to emulate market leaders' appearances. Also, shelf impact is more important in a fragmented category with low brand loyalty such as barbecue sauce than in a category with few major players and loyal customers such as canned soup. Finally, shelf impact includes competing in the "pantry shopping" process. The front panel may make the sale at the store, but the side or back panel may be more important in the freezer, refrigerator, or pantry.

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### Maximize Trial Potential - Build Brand Image

You must communicate the product's reason for being, and remember, in the consumer's mind, the package is the product. When you think of Snapple, you see the bottle, not the tea. When you think of Coca-Cola, you see red, not brown.

Less is more. At the point-of-purchase, consumers must pick up from the front panel the two or three elements that provide the product's reason for being, differentiation, or justification. Value perception is key in driving purchase interest. If a product costs more than others, explain the reasons behind the cost.

One effective way to improve a package's communication is through the picture of the product. If a product's key deliverable is easy preparation, a picture of a child preparing it may improve its convenience perception.



### Packaging Research

Research may help identify the ideal combination of functional and graphic elements. Since consumers are reluctant to admit that packaging affects their purchases or opinions of brands, it helps to always do package research in the real-world environment where the package will compete.

For example, the researched product should be placed on the retail shelf alongside existing offerings. Consumers observed shopping the category then can be prompted to examine the shelf. They can be asked a series of questions determining elements like shelf impact, purchase interest, and package appeal for the test package as well as other products in the category. Extend the research methodology by giving a product to consumers to use at home. After transporting it, storing it, preparing it, reusing it, and disposing of it, consumers can accurately report their perceptions of the product and package.

Editor's Note: William Hruby and James Sorensen have a combined three decades of packaged goods market research and advertising experience. Sorensen Associates Inc is an in-store marketing research firm, with its corporate office in Troutdale, Oregon, and regional offices in Minnesota and Pennsylvania.

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### One Company's Experience

In 1997, a food manufacturer introduced "Quick Meal" (packed in a flexible carton) in a category they had been doing business in for some time. (Quick Meal is a fictitious name.) The new product offered all the benefits of the original line but with some significant preparation enhancements and more servings per package -- at a higher price. After introduction, sales volume was significantly lower than expected.

#### Quick Meal Case Study...

- *Packaging too similar to the brand's other line in the category.*
- *Photo did not adequately show how the product was intended to be prepared and used.*
- *Higher number of servings was missed, thus failing to convey the value message.*

The marketing team considered several issues such as distribution, shelving, product delivery, and promotion, but concluded that packaging likely was a primary reason for the slow sales. During introduction, Quick Meal was not supported by advertising, thus the product had to gain trial by being noticed on the shelf.

Research into potential problems identified the following:

- The package looked too similar to the brand's other line in the category.
- The photo did not adequately show how the product was intended to be prepared and used.
- The higher number of servings was missed, thus failing to convey the value message.

In response, a new package was designed. The food illustration was adjusted, as was the location of several banners and flags. The intended preparation method was moved to the top left corner. (Packages are read from left to right, top to bottom.) The new design prominently displayed the number of servings in a red banner in the center of the package.

### Findings & Conclusions

The key finding from this study was that the brand team's analysis was right. In general, the original package did not fully convey Quick Meal's benefits, but by moving the key preparation benefit to the package's top-left corner, consumers more accurately understood what the product was. The revised product photo and tweaking of other banners and flags also contributed to the improved communication. Shoppers now better understood the number of servings and value of the package.

The improved shelf impact and concept communication led to an improved perception of value-for-the-money and intent-to-purchase. These study results were later validated by increased sales of the restaged product.