

Packaging as Strategy

Why Fresh Produce Must Treat Packaging as a Marketing Tool



A fresh perspective on fresh produce packaging, branding, and strategy.



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Executive Summary

In fresh produce, packaging is too often treated as an afterthought: a container, a cost, or a protective vessel to move product safely from point A to point B. But packaging is far more than that. It is the most visible, consistent, and persuasive piece of marketing you have.

Packaging is a point-of-sale billboard—a frontline sales tool that every shopper sees. Yet many fresh produce companies still fail to leverage packaging to its full potential.

This paper outlines why packaging must be repositioned as a strategic sales driver, the consequences of underutilizing it, and how companies can begin to think differently to create brands and packs that sell.

“If your consumer message doesn’t make it onto the pack, it doesn’t exist.”



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The Packaging Disconnect

I've lost count of how many times I've seen our industry celebrate a "game-changing" product innovation—only for the launch to fall flat at retail. The culprit? Underwhelming packaging.

Take the example of a recent Honey Mango launch. The press release was excellent: descriptive, consumer-centric, highlighting benefits like fiberless texture, creamy taste, and snack-sized convenience. It told a compelling story that perfectly aligned with consumer desires.

Then came the packaging. Not a single one of those benefits made it onto the front-facing label. The story that could have won consumers at shelf never even reached them.

Strategic Insight

If your consumer message doesn't make it onto the pack, it doesn't exist.



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What Consumers Really See (and Don't)

As an Adjunct Professor of Produce Marketing at Cal Poly State University, I have a unique window into how the next generation of shoppers thinks. Each year, I work with senior students who analyze real-world produce packaging. Their feedback is eye-opening.

Presented with a collection of grape pouches, berry clamshells, avocado nets, and mandarin bags, most students could not distinguish between a grower brand and a varietal name. With apples, years of consistent branding helped them recognize Honeycrisp or Pink Lady. But with cherries? Confusion reigned.

For example: handed an empty bag of Rainier cherries, students had no idea Rainier was a special, limited season cherry variety, couldn't describe its unique look or taste, and didn't know why they should buy it or pay more for it. The packaging simply didn't tell them.

Strategic Insight

If packaging doesn't explain it, consumers won't know it – and they won't buy it.



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The New Consumer Reality

Today's Gen Z and Millennial shoppers are fluent in packaged goods messaging. They've been trained to scan packs for fast, functional, consumer-centric cues relevant to their buying needs:

- Grams of Protein
- Keto-friendly
- Supports gut health
- Antioxidants

They expect packaging to educate and inspire.

Yet in fresh produce, we often reduce packs to nothing more than product names and grower brands.

This creates a dangerous disconnect—especially with Gen Z and younger Millennials. When fresh produce packaging fails to speak their language, they turn to center store products, where claims are bold, benefits are clear, and products feel tailored to their needs.

Strategic Insight

The bar for consumer communication is getting higher, not lower. If you don't tell the story, someone else will.



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What's at Stake

Ignoring packaging as a marketing tool carries real costs:

- **Lost Sales** – Products go unnoticed or undervalued at shelf.
- **Commoditization** – Produce becomes interchangeable, competing only on price.
- **Missed Opportunities** – Nutritional and flavor stories remain untold, leaving younger consumers disengaged.
- **Reduced premiumization** – shoppers won't pay more for special varieties unless they understand why there is value

Fresh produce companies cannot afford to ignore the competitive advantage consumer-centric packaging communication offers.



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Strategic Recommendations

To unlock packaging as a strategic sales tool, leaders must adopt a new mindset: strategy first, design second.

Here's how to start:

1. **Move Consumer Messaging from PR to the Pack** – Every claim in a press release should be tested for packaging application.
2. **Highlight Differentiation at Shelf** – Flavor, nutrition, seasonality, usage—all belong front and center.
3. **Tailor Messaging to Life Stage & Values** –
 - Gen Z: functional benefits (focus, skin health, sleep)
 - Millennials: convenience and family wellness.
 - Boomers: vitality, longevity, and trusted nutrition.
4. **Adopt a Strategic Framework**, like my **Persuasive Packaging Pathway™** to guide decisions:
 - **Positioning** – clarify your unique story.
 - **Persuasion** – design packaging to be a persuasive salesperson.
 - **Premiumization** – build margin and brand resilience.



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Conclusion

Our industry produces the most flavorful, nutritious, and crave-worthy products on the planet. But too often, we let those products down with packaging that fails to communicate, inspire, or persuade shoppers to buy.

It's time to treat packaging as the frontline marketing asset it truly is—not just a protective container, not just as a method to restate the obvious, but a strategic tool for growth.

The companies that embrace this shift will capture more sales, build stronger brands, and secure premium positions in the market.

Those who don't risk being left behind.

If you're ready to think differently about packaging—as strategy, not decoration or protection—I can help.



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About the Author

Lisa Cork is a fresh produce brand and packaging strategist with more than 30 years of experience helping companies create packaging that sells. She is a marketing award winner and was named as one of 35 industry vanguards for her work on fresh produce branding and packaging.

As an Adjunct Professor of Produce Marketing at Cal Poly State University, Lisa brings unique insight into the mindset of next-generation consumers and has advised leading growers, marketers, and retailers on packaging strategy, brand differentiation, and market positioning.



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