

The Future of Fresh Produce Branding & Packaging

AI, Strategy and the New Rules of Consumer Engagement



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



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Executive Summary

Technology and consumer expectations are reshaping how fresh produce companies must think about branding and packaging.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers powerful tools to accelerate design and generate new ideas. Meanwhile, shoppers are more brand-literate and more empowered than ever before—able to influence perception and sales with a single click or review.

This paper explores:

- The reality versus the hype of AI in packaging.
- Why brand strategy must move from marketing teams into the C-suite.
- How leaders can link packaging, branding, and consumer trust into one strategic agenda.

The takeaway is clear: AI and branding are not optional. They are strategic imperatives that, when approached with the right frameworks, drive innovation, differentiation, and resilience..

“AI is a tool, not the strategy.”



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The Reality of AI in Packaging Design

I teach the USA's only university fresh produce marketing course. During class, students analyzed produce brands and challenged me: "Do you use AI for packaging design?" I hadn't—so I experimented.

Starting with blueberries, I:

- Researched consumer motives (Fresh Trends, Blueberry Council insights, student surveys).
- Fed those insights into AI tools to generate label concepts and keywords.
- Iterated designs with AI prompts.
- Refined final concepts with a designer and tested them against traditional packaging.

What I learned:

- AI can rapidly generate fresh concepts. Multiple blueberry label variations were created in under five hours.
- When testing a new concept pack, consumers noticed the difference. Out of 445 surveyed, the AI-driven design outperformed traditional packaging on eye-catching and innovation.
- Generational impact matters. While overall purchase intent was slightly lower for the AI design, Gen Z's purchase likelihood jumped dramatically.

Strategic Insight

AI is a tool, not the strategy. Its value comes when leaders combine AI outputs with clear brand positioning and consumer insight.



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Why Brand Strategy Belongs in the C-Suite

For too long, branding has been treated as a marketing expense—a project to be delegated rather than a core business issue. But the market has changed.

Ten years ago: Shelf presence and retailer control determined whether a shopper bought your product. Packaging mattered, but choice was limited.

Today: Shoppers buy online, via Instacart, Amazon, or direct-to-consumer channels. They can compare brands instantly, leave reviews publicly, and influence thousands of peers.

This shift means:

- The shopper now controls your brand.
- One bad review is louder than one hundred positive experiences.
- Without a strong brand strategy, you risk being commoditized and exposed.

At its highest level, brand strategy is inseparable from company strategy. Purpose, Vision, Mission, and Values are not wordsmithing exercises—they are the heartbeat of a resilient brand.

Strong example: Driscoll's. Their Vision ("To become the world's berry company, enriching the lives of everyone we touch") and Mission ("To continually delight berry consumers...") clearly align the company, brand, and their global expansion strategy.

Weak example: Companies that chase acquisitions without clear brand understanding or direction—eroding once-esteemed brand equity in the

Strategic Insight

**Strong strategic foundations build resilient brands.
Weak ones destroy them.**



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The Future of Branding & Packaging Strategy

So, where does this leave fresh produce companies? The future belongs to those who:

1. Integrate AI Thoughtfully – Use AI to accelerate packaging concepts and design but guide it with strategy.
2. Elevate Branding to the Boardroom – Brand is no longer marketing's problem. It is the organization's promise.
3. Link Packaging to Brand Strategy – Packaging is the execution of brand strategy at shelf and online.
4. Adopt a Strategic Framework – Apply models like my Persuasive Packaging Pathway™ to ensure packaging aligns with what consumers want to buy:
 - Positioning – clarify your unique story.
 - Persuasion – use packaging as a silent salesperson.
 - Premiumization – elevate your category and margins.

Strategic Insight

The future of branding belongs to companies that treat packaging and brand as strategy—not decoration.



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Conclusion

The myth is that AI will take over packaging and branding. The reality is more powerful: AI, when paired with a strong brand strategy, can unlock innovation and connect with new generations of consumers.

At the same time, brands can no longer afford to be managed tactically. In a hyperconnected world, brand strategy must live at the C-suite level—with packaging as its frontline execution.

The future of fresh produce branding belongs to companies that treat packaging and brand as strategy. Those who don't risk irrelevance.

If you want to explore how to align packaging, branding, and modern tools like AI into a winning strategy, 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.



Let's Talk Strategy – Book a Consultation Today
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