At Perception Research Services (PRS), we are fortunate to assess hundreds of new packaging systems each year, for both new products and restages of existing brands. While many succeed, both in validation studies and in market, we also encounter many new packaging features and graphics that fail to make a difference. Often, this is due to a lack of effective on-pack messaging:

- A new appearance may drive a second look and/or convey an updated personality, but it is usually not enough to convince competitive users to switch brands.
- A new feature or benefit may be compelling, but it fails to convert new buyers, because so few shoppers even see it upon their first glance at the packaging.

With this thought in mind, this article shares our collective experience and perspective regarding both the content and presentation of on-pack messaging, along with several recommended best practices for promoting effective communication.

**FINDING A COMPELLING MESSAGE**

There are two primary components to effective messaging, which are arguably of equal importance:

- Content (identifying a compelling claim or message)
- Presentation (ensuring that this content is consistently seen)

Of course, it is more difficult to generalize about the former, as the right message will inevitably vary across brands and marketing objectives. However, we can share several fundamental principles to guide the development process.

1. **“Frame” the packaging change.**

   When shoppers encounter a new look for a familiar brand, their natural first reaction is to ask themselves what has changed. Thus, it is vital for the packaging to answer this question quickly and clearly in a positive manner, especially when the brand has a good story to tell (“Improved formula,” for example).

2. **Provide reassurance.**

   It’s also important to recognize that shoppers are both risk-averse and increasingly cynical about packaging changes due to pack reduction/downsizing.
Provide Reassurance

On-pack messaging is vital in providing reassurance, particularly when shoppers encounter a new packaging structure.

Convey Value

We've found that the bright yellow color (used on many violators) can have negative associations (tied to low quality).

DRAWING THE SHOPPER’S ATTENTION

No matter how compelling, a claim can’t be effective unless it is seen — and our experience strongly suggests that shoppers’ attention can’t be taken for granted. In fact, when we use PRS Eye-Tracking to document how shoppers view packages, we often find major differences in visibility and readership levels, based on the location, size and creative execution of on-pack claims. Fortunately, however, eye tracking has also revealed universal best practices for helping ensure that consumers see primary messages.

1. Prioritize a lead claim.

First and foremost, we know that shoppers don’t fully consider packages. In fact, they typically spend under five seconds with a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) package — actively engage with only four design elements (perhaps the brand mark, the product name, a main visual — and one message). Importantly, we’ve seen that adding messages doesn’t generally lead to increased viewing time; Instead, it results in more elements fighting each other for the shopper’s limited attention. Therefore, less is more in terms of on-pack messaging, both in terms of the number of claims and the number of words in a claim. Indeed, we’ve consistently found that shorter claims (with fewer words and, often, larger font styles) are far more likely to be read than longer ones.

2. Integrate with the brand mark or main visual.

Eye tracking also shows us that packages are not read like books in a predefined flow from top to bottom and/or left to right. Instead, the layout and design of a package determines how it is first viewed: Shoppers are drawn to the strongest visual element (usually the brand mark or main visual), which is often positioned centrally. For this reason, we’ve found that violators in the top left or right corners often fall outside the shoppers’ primary viewing flow — and thus are usually missed by about two-thirds of shoppers (only 35 percent visibility). By contrast, more centrally located claims (integrated with main visuals or brand marks) typically have visibility levels of 50 to 60 percent.

3. Communicate visually.

Of course, creative execution does affect the visibility of on-pack claims. We’ve seen the exact same message draw widely varying levels of attention, depending on its treatment (graphic execution, size, positioning, font style, etc.). Predictably, bigger/bolder messaging creates more contrast and drives higher levels of attention. In addition, we’ve seen that claims with visual icons are more likely to be seen/viewed than those with text alone. Thus, when executing multilingual packaging, we encourage clients to communicate key information visually when possible (as opposed to repeating copy points in multiple languages).

However, based on experience, we’d also caution marketers against going too far in the pursuit of claims readership. For example, across several categories and countries, we’ve found that bright yellow (which is now the color of choice for
many violators) carries a negative association (such as cheap/poor quality), which can detract from brand imagery and product perceptions.

4. “Commit” to promotional packaging.
Finally, we’ve seen that promotional endorsements on packages (Olympic logos, linkages to cartoon characters, co-branded ingredients, etc.) often have very low visibility levels (typically under 20 percent) and impact, due to their recessive treatment. However, when executed correctly, we’ve also seen that cause-related messaging or promotions (such as linkages to charities) can have a very positive influence on brand perceptions and purchase. Instead of burying a potentially compelling story, marketers are often better-served fully committing to it with dedicated promotional packs (the Disney pack, the Olympics pack, the charity pack, etc.) that complement the traditional packaging.

ENSURING EFFECTIVE ON-PACK MESSAGING
What can marketers do to help ensure effective packaging claims across brands and initiatives? Here are three recommended best practices that can be built into consistent design and research processes.

1. Develop consistent guidelines for on-pack messaging.
As outlined above, there are largely universal principles to increase the likelihood that shoppers will see claims as they first view packaging. By establishing principles (regarding the size, location and length of violators, for example), marketers can avoid reinventing the wheel (and/or relying on judgment) for each initiative. This will help ensure that on-pack claims cross the first hurdle of gaining attention.

2. Screen alternative claims within a packaging or POS context.
Of course, most companies have processes for screening and selecting product claims. However, these studies are typically conducted without packaging or shelf context: Claims are shown in isolation, rather than as they will actually appear to shoppers. Thus, this approach doesn’t provide a sense of how well claims work or “fit” with the packaging (in defining a pack change, providing reassurance, conveying a new product’s point of difference, etc.). Even more importantly, testing claims in isolation can provide misleading findings: In the absence of context, consumers tend to say that more is better — if additional claims or extra words serve to more fully explain a feature (and/or convey additional product benefits), they will often lead to higher ratings. However, in the real world of cluttered packages, we know that shorter and bolder claims are more visible and impactful. At PRS, we’ve been working with several clients to screen alternative on-pack claims (content, placement and creative execution), via a combination of eye tracking (to gauge visibility) and interviewing (to assess communication). Ideally, this is done in conjunction with the development and screening of new graphic designs and/or pack structures, to provide efficiencies and ensure that design and messaging are working effectively together.

3. Validate new packaging systems with on-pack claims.
Across clients, we’ve encountered varying perspectives as to whether or not new design systems should be assessed with claims and violators. In fact, some companies prefer to test new packaging systems “clean” (without violators), on the premise that claims will change repeatedly over the lifespan of a given pack design. We feel differently, as our experience suggests that the right claim can make an enormous difference on shopper perceptions. Moreover, we’ve seen that the first few purchase cycles are the most critical, for both new product introductions and restages of established brands. Thus, our philosophy is to test packaging as it will first appear on shelf — and to encourage clients to invest the time/energy needed to ensure that they get the message, along with the design, right.

As these best practices illustrate, the larger point is that marketers and designers should embrace on-pack messaging as an important and necessary component of effective packaging, rather than an afterthought or a violation of their designs. To this end, they need to build claims development and execution into the design process to help ensure that on-pack messaging is working to complement a new appearance. Those who adopt an integrated approach are likely to be rewarded with higher success rates — and better returns from their packaging investments. BP

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