

Designing Brave New Brands

In the future, what will store brand marketers depend on more than ever to offset the huge marketing budgets of national brand manufacturers? Their own private labels.

In the past, private label strategy in the U.S. has focused on "me-too" labels that simply mimicked the national brand leaders.

Over the last five years this has begun to change. From Safeway and Albertson's to Target and Costco, marketers of private labels have become more and more innovative with their products and branding. Instead of imitating the national brands, private labels are starting to compete head to head with them.

In the grocery aisle, most of this shift is occurring with a fraction of the marketing dollars Proctor & Gamble, Kraft or Unilever put behind their products. So what do the private labels depend on more than ever? Their labels.

Trend Watch

Before I get into label design specifically, let's acknowledge a couple of recent trends:

From a consumer perspective, private labels are more acceptable than ever. And in certain scenarios these brands are indistinguishable from the competition.

It used to be that shoppers wouldn't want to be seen with private label goods piled up in their carts. Now, if you go to Whole Foods Market, you'll see that consumers aren't at all apologetic about having a cart full of the store's 365 Brand line of products.

From the marketer's perspective, they are creating more innovative products and proliferating their private labels across categories in the store.

Trader Joe's blazed the innovation trail. TJ shoppers will tell you they go specifically to discover new foods and beverages, something that can't be said about most supermarkets.

In Canada, Loblaws has proven themselves masters at extending the President's Choice brand across product categories, from dog food to pillowcases to potting soil.

These consumer and marketer changes are completely altering the way private label brand pack-

ages need to be designed. Retailers used to fulfill their need for bargain brands by going to third-party vendors who were supplying product to multiple stores. It was the same product and same package for everyone. It was also common that the label printing company would swap out a brand logo and simply use generic or existing photography and graphics for all store brands. It was almost non-designed. In the current world of private label, there are much more effective ways to market store brands. And one of the most effective tools is developing a strategic and extensible approach to label design.

Three Best Practices

At Philippe Becker Design, we've developed three best practices for designing successful private label

brands and their packages in today's environment.

1. Stand for something and communicate it on the package; that label may be all you've got.

Instead of blending in with the national brands, to succeed it's necessary that private labels bear their own personality. By defining a distinctive point of view they have the opportunity to create a whole experience behind their brands.

If done correctly this can raise the status of the store label beyond that of leading national brands and increase consumer loyalty to both the private label and the store as a whole.

"But we want people to know we're the inexpensive alternative," you might say. And that's fine, but don't be afraid of giving your products a voice, something your consumers can remember and want to keep in their cupboards and refrigerators.

I think a lot of private labels miss the boat here. If you look around the marketplace, there are many retailers with brands that fade into the background. The labels have no personality; they don't communicate "premium."

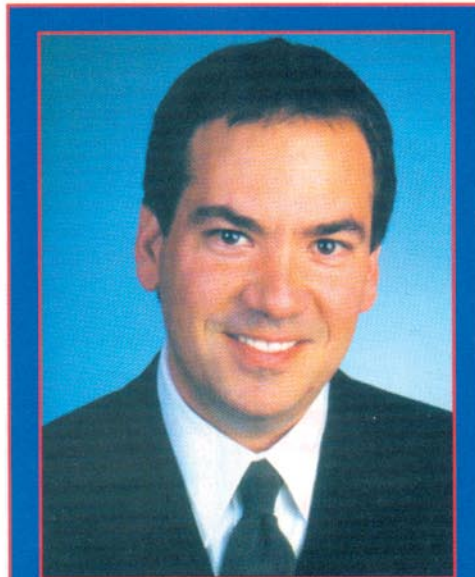
There are also some real standouts. Trader Joe's does a great job of using unique packaging to implicitly give the message that consumers are in for some unexpected, some exotic, and some fun products, all at great prices.

Another success is the Whole Foods 365 line. The label says exactly what it is—Every Day Value (365 days a year)—and the bold, four-color design of the logo stands out in the grocery aisle.

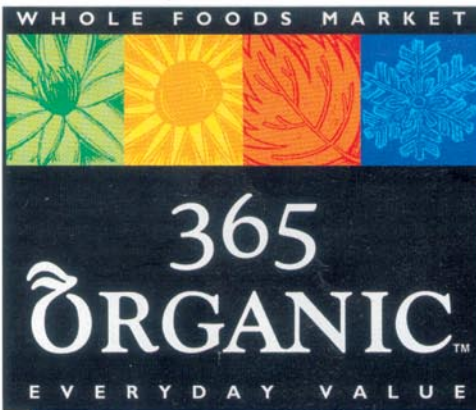
With both private labels, the result is a strong brand that consumers can relate to and are willing to go along with for an adventure.

2. Clearly define your family of brands and their relation to each other through package design.

Walking into many stores, it's difficult to make sense of the various brands and sub-brands within the private label portfolio. Packages often contain price and quality cues that give mixed messages.



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Left: The 365 Organic Food logo of Whole Foods is designed to communicate nature and everyday value to shoppers.

Right: Packaging for the Tuxedos line of store brand cookies from Safeway conveys an image of style and sophistication.



At a minimum, this confusion lessens the effectiveness of the store's private label strategy.

At its worst, it actually undermines the perceived value of the entire range of store brands, takes away from the value of the store itself, and turns away shoppers looking for something they understand.

In order to avoid this, it is important that retailers clearly define their family of brands and tiers. Define the rules for your family of brands before you design the package. Avoid going down the path of package design with a simple "I'll know it's the right design when I see it" approach.

A solid strategic platform and creative brief will be the criteria by which you judge all package design and brand extension decisions. It's a combination of visual brand architecture and information hierarchy.

Within each family, the sub-brands should support the positionings of the primary brands.

More often than not, simplicity is crucial. The system of brands should be obvious to customers and especially obvious to the person stocking the shelf.

3. Connect with your customers. This is obvious, but remember, the package may be the first (and last) impression.

Your private label product has to tell people what and why in about 3 seconds. That is, if they see your product on the shelf. In other words, to make a connection with consumers you have to be immediately relevant and differentiated.

Relevance is all about giving people what they want.

Differentiation is all about creating a relationship with consumers. This is the part of the communication where the product's personality must come through.

Does your label say "farm fresh and high quality" or does it say "been sitting here for years since I was shipped from the overseas factory"? Does it

say "youthful" or "mature"? You must decide the manner in which you will connect with your target audience through package design.

The structure of the package and the words and graphics on the label all meld together to be one important presentation of your product and brand.

Managing the Message

So how can the package design put out that alluring message in such limited space?

Subtleties like color palette, typography, and illustration and photo styles have to be strategically designed, executed and protected. And not-so-subtle aspects like package shape, the name of the product, and the information hierarchy must also be grounded in a well-crafted design brief.

Pulling all these elements together through an iterative process between client and design firm is

part art, part science.

The scientific part includes developing the positioning, understanding the physical shelf environment, and knowing the target consumer.

The artistic part is graphically interpreting the brand and product strategy in a number of ways so the client can see several potential package design solutions.

The goal behind innovating your products and packaging is to have consumers seeking your brand because you've connected with them, convincing them that you're fulfilling a functional need or an emotional benefit, telling them exactly what you stand for, and proving to them that you're unique.

Beyond selling more private label products, the successful private label strategy has the potential to transform a supermarket from just another place to buy groceries into a desired shopping destination.



Above: Trader Joe's uses packaging graphics to tell consumers they are in for some unexpected, some exotic, and some fun products as seen here with TJ's BBQ sauce and TJ's Tortilla Chips.

