Packaging and positioning of a product

Lesson 4.4.1 | Consumer psychology

Core ideas

Packaging can attract attention and communicate information before the consumer uses the product.

Colour, shape, materials, images and wording can create expectations about quality, taste, safety or status.

Product positioning can mean where an item is placed physically, such as shelf height, or how it is positioned psychologically, such as budget or premium.

Shelf position and visibility affect which products are noticed, compared and chosen.

Packaging should fit the target audience, brand identity, product category and cultural context.

Research on packaging and positioning must consider price, brand familiarity, need, promotions and store environment as possible confounds.

Key terms

Packaging: The external container, label and visual design of a product.

Product positioning: How a product is placed or presented relative to alternatives.

Shelf position: Where a product is placed on a shelf or display.

Brand image: The overall impression consumers have of a brand.

Category cue: A feature that signals what type of product something is.

Premium positioning: Presenting a product as high quality, exclusive or higher status.

Visibility: How easily a product can be seen and noticed.

Target audience: The consumer group a product is designed or marketed toward.

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Further detail and evidence

Key study: Becker et al. (2011) investigated whether visual package potency transfers to taste impressions, especially in design-sensitive consumers.

The main study involved 151 customers, 74 male and 77 female, aged 15-81, at a German supermarket.

A factorial field experiment varied angular versus rounded yoghurt packaging and higher versus lower colour saturation; the yoghurt was held constant.

Participants viewed packaging, tasted yoghurt and rated taste intensity, product evaluations and expected price. Sensitivity to design was also measured.

Angular packaging produced stronger taste impressions, particularly among design-sensitive participants. Shape and saturation also influenced some broader product/price evaluations.

Gift-wrapping can signal care, effort, occasion and the relationship between giver and recipient, while concealing the object and creating anticipation. Compare the giver's intention with the recipient's interpretation: elaborate wrapping can raise expectations that the gift itself may not meet. Wrapping type, occasion and cultural norms can change its meaning. Compare decorative paper, gift bags, transparent wrapping and an unwrapped presentation: visibility, effort and expectations can differ.

A planogram specifies where products and their facings should be placed on shelves or displays. A product's horizontal position within its category can influence attention, alongside brand, price, package design and shoppers' goals.

The central gaze cascade effect is an increasing concentration of gaze on a centrally positioned option shortly before a choice. It differs from simply looking at the centre first.

Example study - Atalay, Bodur and Rasolofoarison (2012) used computer-based eye tracking and an experiment with tangible products. Centrally placed brands attracted more attention and were chosen more often. The late central gaze cascade, rather than initial central fixation, related to choice; category-centre effects also occurred away from the centre of the visual field.

Eye tracking records where and when people look; retrospective claims about what attracted attention need not agree with eye movements. The study supports a role for placement, not a claim that every centrally displayed product will be selected.

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Continued

Packaging communicates identity, quality and expected sensation through shape, colour, material and information. Gift wrapping can also signal occasion, effort and the giver-recipient relationship. A utilitarian gift and a symbolic gift may create different expectations about appropriate presentation.

Positioning: a planogram specifies where products are placed on shelves/displays. Central position can attract gaze and choice. Atalay et al. (2012) used eye-tracking and choice tasks to investigate a central gaze cascade: centrally placed items received attention that increasingly favoured the eventual choice.

Keep perceptual variables separate: angular versus rounded packaging and high versus low colour saturation are distinct manipulations. Becker tested taste expectations/experience with the same yoghurt; a packaging effect does not imply a chemical change in the product.

Applying the ideas

A retailer can rotate product positions while holding price/stock constant, then record fixations and sales. A producer can test whether packaging implies an intense or mild taste. Eye movement can suggest an attentional pathway, but actual choice data are needed before claiming a sales effect.

Evaluation and connections

This supports cross-modal transfer: information in one sensory modality can shape another. Colour effects were not uniformly identical to shape effects.

Keeping food constant supports a package-based explanation; one food, subjective ratings and one supermarket limit generalisation.

Evaluate situational cues alongside individual design sensitivity; angular packaging did not physically change the ingredients.

Becker's factorial design separates shape and saturation, while sensitivity to design helps explain individual differences. Standardising the yoghurt improves internal validity. One product and local shoppers limit generalisation. Packaging can influence expectations without overriding every sensory cue or preference.