

Marketing Series for Women Entrepreneurs

Part 6: Product Packaging: How to Skip the Rookie Mistakes

Whether you are putting hang tags on an artisan handcrafted necklace or bottling your grandma's famous cherry compote recipe, packaging plays a significant role in selling a product effectively. Packaging creates a powerful first impression, so you want to do it well. You also want to do it right the first time, so you don't have a costly re-do on your hands. Here are some things to keep in mind that will ease the steep learning curve.

What Not to Do

Production and manufacturing of any sort includes a very steep learning curve. When there are so many details to consider, there are many things that can go wrong. Here are a few things **not** to do:

1. Don't buy packaging too early in the process. Products go through a variety of tweaks and revisions as kinks get worked out on the way toward final commercialization. Jumping the gun may seem like a bargain at the time, but can be costly in the long run. Take the sauce company that bought bottles before finalizing their manufacturer. Turns out the co-packer couldn't use them on his bottling line which meant thousands of dollars down the drain.
2. Don't compromise your brand. The quality of your packaging immediately conveys the value of the product inside it. You may save a few bucks using a cheaper packaging option, but if the product doesn't sell because it isn't appealing or looks cheap and shoddy when it isn't, you'll have to do it again. It seems like savings in the short-term but in the end it's a huge money waster and means costly delays in getting a return on your investment.

Judy McArthur and Maureen Drew, owners of [Artisan Edibles](#) did it right. They integrated their love of art into their business, not just through their fantastic jelly and chutney recipes, but also through the packaging in which each product is presented. Every product comes in a beautiful Italian jar that's worth keeping, even when it's empty.

"Customers appreciate our branding and packaging – the artfulness and elegance – and of course that the product delivers on taste and quality," says Drew. "Artisan Edibles is always classy, professional and on trend."

3. Don't pay premium prices. Remember that packaging is typically tossed. There is a balance between top quality and over-the-top. Negotiate with your packaging supplier, ask for volume

discounts, inquire about comparable but less costly (and perhaps more environmentally friendly) alternatives. Above all, ensure that cost is balanced with overall profitability.

Rules for Effective Packaging

Packaging creates the ultimate first impression, which means you need to get it right the first time. Increase your likelihood of making a great first impression by following these rules:

1. Get creative! Unless your product can talk, the packaging needs to attract interest as well as communicate your brand and uniqueness. Look for unique or non-traditional ways to package, like the high end fruit juice that comes in a wine bottle. Or bath salts that come in a vase. Know your constraints (see Field Testing below), then get creative within them.
2. Field test the packaging. Don't settle on the first design or take anyone's word for it. Have a few mock ups put together and put them to the test. Does it hold up to wear and tear? Variables will depend on the product and may include sunlight exposure, temperature and moisture variations, customer handling, and baby-proofing. And be willing to accept customer feedback on whether your packaging is working.

Dale Dubberley, owner of [Thai Away Food](#) produces gourmet frozen Thai meals that can be heated and served within seven minutes. In consideration of her customers, she initially put the food products in clear bags so customers could see what they were purchasing.

Although the intent to have "honest packaging" was sincere, the reality was that frozen food doesn't look so appealing after a while! Dubberley learned from this lesson and revised her packaging with a bright blue brand that stands out nicely and showcases product appeal in the frozen food section.

3. Collaborate with your marketing and graphics teams to ensure the overall look and design accurately reflect the product's brand. Unless your product talks, packaging does more than look good. It must also attract buyers' interest, communicate value, and encourage purchase.

Use all of the packaging real estate to market and cross promote other products you may sell. At the very least, be sure to include your website address.

4. Consider storage, shipping and shelf display needs. How sturdy does your packaging need to be? Factors to consider include where you're selling – local retail, direct to consumer or international mail order. These decisions also affect whether items are individually or group packaged, what materials are most suitable, and whether the packaging needs to be able to stand up to being tossed around a little.

"Package with integrity," suggest Dubberley. "We have intelligent consumers today and they recognize misrepresentation in packaging. The industry has also changed considerably over the years and there is now a trend towards honest and efficient packaging."

Stores also want you to take up as little shelf space as possible because it leaves them with room for other products. Thai Away is also aiming to soon sell our products in 100 per cent compostable packaging. With the increasing Green movements it's now affordable for small businesses to go with the Green option.”

5. Learn the labeling requirements for your industry. There are rigorous government-mandated regulations for what information must be included on the packaging of some products, such as medical devices, food products and baby products. You must comply with these regulations or face stiff penalties and in many cases, significant additional cost. Be smart, know before you start.

In addition to any regulatory information, be sure to allow space for logistical information such as a barcode if the product will be sold in a retail environment and space for a shipping label if it will be mailed or couriered direct to your customers. Carefully evaluate everything on the label and ensure you are using the space effectively.

In a nutshell, when you're packaging your product take steps to ensure you don't have to do it twice! Keep in mind the old carpenter's adage: measure twice, cut once.

Not only will the product evolve, so may your ideas of the best way to present it. Start thinking about packaging early in the process, toss around ideas for a while, and brainstorm with your graphic design team. Only after you've ironed out any hiccups should you write up the purchase order.

Written in collaboration with Liz Gaige.

Liz Gaige, owner of [Market Navigators Consulting](#), specializes in bringing creativity and a double shot of inspiration to business and marketing strategies for businesses of all sizes. By her own admission, she does her best work when she's just a little bit cheeky!

Around the corner or around the province, [Women's Enterprise Centre](#) is helping women start, grow, and succeed in business by offering business advisory services, business skills training, business loans, resources, publications and referrals.

All examples cited are BC business owners who have been profiled at Women's Enterprise Centre publications, events or workshops.