Product Logos: How to Analyze and Design Them

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Keys to analyzing and designing logos for supermarket packaging.

In the universe of graphic design, the product logo holds a unique place, particularly when it comes to the packaging that populates supermarket shelves. These marks, which identify food, personal care, and cleaning products, fulfill specific functions that distinguish them from other categories of graphic marks, such as corporate, place, or event brands. However,

specialized literature and studies on this branding subgenre are practically nonexistent, revealing an emerging knowledge base and a vast path ahead. In this article, we will explore the essential characteristics of the product logo, its particularities in the context of packaging, and the keys to its effective design, aiming to advance its understanding and optimize its performance.

What Is a Product Logo?

The product logo is one applied directly to packaging to identify it; that is, to enable the public to recognize and recall it at the point of sale, primarily in supermarkets. Unlike a corporate logo, which typically represents an organization, or a place logo, which identifies a geographic destination, the product logo must, in nearly all its uses, stand out in a visually saturated environment: the supermarket shelf. Its primary purpose is to identify the product and contribute, to some extent, to its brand positioning.

It is important to clarify that the idea that a product logo must convey the product's essence or brand values is entirely mistaken. Its function is purely identificatory, which does not mean that this mark, when put into use, particularly on the product's packaging, cannot evoke those ideas, but only once they have already been established in the public's mind.

What Types of Product Logos Exist?

Upon analyzing packaging in any supermarket, it becomes evident that product logos tend to be predominantly nominal; that is, they lack a graphic symbol. This means that the logo—the graphic representation of the product's name—is the central identifying element and, in the vast majority of cases, the only one. The most common formats include:

- Standalone logos, without additional elements.

- Logos with graphic backgrounds, often horizontal ovals or similar shapes typical of commercial identification.

- Logos with graphic accessories, such as underlines or decorative forms that could not function as standalone symbols.

- Logos with both backgrounds and graphic accessories, combining both resources.

- Logos accompanied by illustrations, which sometimes also serve an identificatory function (such as Bimbo's bear, Julius Pringles, or La Campagnola's peasant girl).

In contrast, it is difficult to find product logos with graphic symbols, and it is practically impossible to find packaging signed solely by a symbol without a logo, as occurs—in certain uses—with many corporate brands that have one. The product's name, materialized in the logo, always plays a leading role, ensuring the product is recognizable at first glance.

Typical Characteristics of Product Logos

To understand how to design an effective product logo, it is essential to analyze its particular characteristics, shaped by the packaging's operational context. Below, I detail some key aspects:

1. High Legibility

In an environment as competitive as the supermarket shelf, legibility is non-negotiable. A logo that is not clearly readable has a serious problem. The ideal is for the public to thoroughly learn the brand name, then recall it and naturally associate it with the corresponding product category: clear legibility is the first step toward achieving that basic positioning.

2. Strong Spatial Performance

The size of the logo's letters is a critical factor: the larger they are, the greater the likelihood that the product will be perceived and recognized from a distance. To maximize letter size, product logos are typically designed with very tight letter spacing—much tighter than that of corporate logos. When letters are brought closer together, issues inevitably arise between certain pairs: excessive gaps or overlaps, which need to be resolved through special adjustments, letter modifications, or ligatures.

The same concept applies to leading in the case of logos composed of more than one line. To achieve the level of adjustment discussed here, it is common for the product logo to be composed with specially drawn or modified letters, rather than standard or off-the-shelf typography. The goal is to optimize negative space to achieve the best possible performance. A logo with well-adjusted internal spacing also contributes to another fundamental characteristic of product logos: "brand character."

3. Brand Character

A logo with brand character is one that fits within the universe of what everyone recognizes at first glance as a brand logo. Most often, this character is achieved by incorporating into the logo:

- Letters with substantial weight (not light).

- Specially drawn or modified letters, rather than standard or off-the-shelf typography.

- Backgrounds and/or graphic accessories typical of historical branding graphics.

- Common commercial branding graphic treatments (gradients, shadows, highlights, decorative outlines, volume simulations, etc.).

The logo's appearance as a brand helps distinguish it from other texts or verbal stimuli in the context of the packaging and on the shelf (descriptions, callouts, product features, etc.) and also aids in its identification as such when it appears in other media, outside the packaging (advertisements, promotions, etc.).

4. Striking and "Commercial" Graphic Style

The graphic style of a product logo, like that of any other brand logos, must be compatible with the brand's profile and, in the case of product logos, also with the expectations of the target audience. Even so, it is easy to identify some very common style characteristics:

- It tends to be striking.

- It often has a commercial feel.

That said, distinctions can be made between the styles of more popular product logos (affordable and aimed at all socioeconomic sectors) and premium or high-end product logos (generally targeting smaller, higher-income audiences). The former tend to adopt more lively, colorful, and visually striking graphic styles. The latter lean toward more sober, simple, elegant, and chromatically "neutral" styles; that is, they are typically more versatile to adapt to different types of messaging.

5. High Memorability

These logos need to be easily remembered. To achieve this, it is common to include a distinctive, highly evident trait in the logo that aids in its recognition at a glance. This distinctiveness can come from a special flourish, the mere selection of a highly unique typeface family, or some characteristic of the composition or finish. The key is to ensure the logo "emits cues" so the public can recognize it even in the worst conditions.

The Product Logo in Packaging

The design of the product logo and that of the packaging are inseparable processes. It is no coincidence that, in nearly all cases, both are developed by the same professional, simultaneously, under a single contract. The logo must integrate harmoniously with the packaging, functioning as the primary identifying element while interacting with its colors, textures, and illustrations. A logo redesign almost always entails a packaging redesign, as both elements are intrinsically connected in their purpose of communicating and "selling."

It is most common for the logo to be the protagonist within the packaging. It may or may not share prominence with a main illustration—or *key visual*—but it always is (or should be) the protagonist, due to the essential identificatory function it performs.

There is a misconception that an excessively large logo applied to a premium or high-end product might be perceived as stylistically inappropriate or out of place. However, the need for identification is the same for all product categories and brand positionings. It could be said that, as a general rule, the size of the logo applied to the packaging should be as large as possible, provided the appropriate style for the packaging is not compromised.

How Long Should a Product Logo Last?

By definition, the logo for anything (company, product, event, etc.) should last as long as

possible, as its ability to evoke brand reputation depends on its recognition by the public. However, product logos are redesigned continually, often alongside the redesign of the packaging—or packagings, in the case of product lines. Is this right or wrong?

Indeed, product logos are redesigned more frequently than corporate ones, but these redesigns are often more like graphic adjustments that the public barely notices. These adjustments rarely stem from a brand repositioning or profile change; rather, they are mere adaptations to current graphic trends or characteristics of a new packaging or product line design. As long as the distinctive, familiar elements are maintained, these minor modifications typically made to the product logo pose no issue from the perspective of its essential identificatory function.

Product Logos: An Unexplored Field

The product logo is an essential component of packaging design, but its study and understanding are still in a larval stage. Its nominal predominance, need for legibility, spatial performance, brand character, style, and memorability make it a subgenre of graphic branding with unique characteristics that deserve in-depth analysis. Designers have the opportunity to contribute to this field by developing specific criteria to aid in its effective design.

Even more concerning than the lack of study and understanding of this logo subgenre is the lack of differentiation between product branding and corporate branding, which prevails in corporate environments, particularly in marketing departments. But that is another story.

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