

“The Full Package:” Student-Centered, Peer Reviewed Packaging Design Activity

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Creativity and packaging are key elements in marketing, yet they are often overlooked in our courses for the sake of covering more objective content, processes, and the main “P”s of marketing. The current teaching innovation challenges students to exercise creative problem solving to not only come up with a product and design its packaging but also it requires peer evaluation, constructive feedback, and self-reflection, to enhance learning outcomes, critical evaluation, and creative skills. More objectively, the activity requires students to take a broader view of packaging and its role in brand identity and purchase intention in-stores.

Keywords: application activity, packaging design, hands-on, product packaging

INTRODUCTION

Capstone courses should be a culmination of a marketing program and leave students prepared for the job market, yet many programs and capstones may overlook some key areas and skills. Prior research has noted the lack of coverage on creativity, aesthetics, creative problem solving, and creative execution (Petkus, Budeva, Chung, & Dzhogleva, 2011; Sommer, 2014)—forcing the students to take risks, put their ideas out there for others to evaluate, and how to provide constructive feedback on the creative work of others (in which there are no “right” or “wrong” answers). More specifically, packaging—lacking its own “P”—is an underrepresented topic in marketing courses, as the focus tends to fall on the product itself and marketing communications for the product (Lee & Hoffman, 2016). Therefore, along with other creative problem solving activities, a creative, peer-reviewed packaging activity was introduced in my capstone course. This activity is meant to focus students on the importance of packaging in the overall marketing mix, to think critically and creatively about the role packaging plays in-stores, and, therefore, what elements are important when designing packaging executions (Ampuero & Vila, 2006; Cochoy, 2004; Rundh, 2009; Sara, 1990; Silayoi & Speece, 2007).

Relationship to Objectives

Packaging is inextricably intertwined and should work in conjunction with a company’s product positioning (Ampuero & Vila, 2006). It plays a critical role in the creation and communication of brand identity (Underwood, 2003), as elements of packaging communicate to consumers the quality, attributes, benefits, value, etc. of the offering and, in turn, have a significant impact on brand preferences and purchase intentions (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2013; Wang, 2013). In fact, about 80% of all purchases decisions are made in store, where packaging is able to influence those choices (Point-of-Purchase Advertising

International, 2014). Therefore, the packaging activity serves as a hand-on, application-based opportunity for students to understand the links between the elements of the marketing mix, positioning of a brand identity, and packaging decisions—with the goal of inducing purchase in-stores. Students are made formally aware of the importance of packaging, the many decisions that go into its design, and how packaging plays a larger role in a company's marketing strategy. By including other elements of the marketing mix (in the worksheet), students are able to demonstrate not only their understanding of packaging elements but also their ability to tie the pieces of the marketing mix together and critically evaluate how they are linked to consumer perceptions of one's offerings.

Beyond the application-based objectives served, the activity asks students to not only use creative problem solving to come up with a product and the packaging for it but, in addition, the format forces student to critically evaluate and communicate their evaluation and suggestions for the work of their peers. This process should naturally force self-reflection, as well, on one's own quality of work and ideas—enhancing the performance and understanding of each individual. The activity dually reinforces the fact that creative processes in marketing often involve multiple iterations of ideas and the input of numerous stakeholders throughout the process.

The Innovation

This is a 2-part activity revolving around the creation of packaging for a new product/brand of the students' choice. Part 1 is dedicated to a review of packaging and a more in-depth discussion of what decisions go into packaging design. This discussion is held in-class, after which the students receive an instructional handout on the packaging requirements (see Appendix I)—asking them to not only create the package and bring it to class, but also requiring them to bring a one-page summary of the product itself, the target market, and the other P's in the marketing mix. This serves to reinforce the role that packaging plays in the marketing strategy—in that it must work with the other elements to effectively reach the target market. Before leaving class, students are also shown exemplary packages from previous semesters to help jog ideas and set a high expectation of their own packaging executions.

Part 2 occurs at the next class meeting, where the students set up their packaging along with their information sheet for others to review. During this part of the exercise, students are instructed to move around the classroom and provide written feedback to their peers. After which, they are asked to review the feedback they received on their own packaging design and to provide a synthesized critique of their own work.

PART 1: IN-PREPARATION + PACKAGING CREATION

Basic Process

During this first class session, an open class discussion is held that examines the role packaging plays in marketing and what elements or decisions must be made surrounding packaging design. The topic is introduced with a brief overview of the 4 P's. Once an overview of the 4 P's is covered, if packaging did not come up under "product," the professor should bring it up and emphasize the importance of packaging as part of the design of company offerings. At this point, an open discussion commences—covering examples of packaging students have seen that have either caught their attention ("wowed" them) or failed them. This, then, leads into a conversation about the elements of packaging. A list is made on the board, and students are encouraged to copy it down for their upcoming assignment. Some common elements, to name a few, include: designing to protect the product, brand name, warning and nutrition information, unique selling proposition, company contact info, etc. Students are also encouraged to think "outside-the-box" with the hope of generating discussion about the role of contests, games, links to social media sites, aesthetic appeal (does it catch one's eye), how does it fit on the shelf or ship, etc. that may also be housed on the packaging or included in the design decisions process. After the class discussion, the worksheet (in Appendix I) is handed out, and students are allowed to examine commendable examples from previous semesters that were brought to class.

Information Provided

During the discussion portion of the class, the aim is to provide a refresher of the marketing mix, how all elements are to be designed around a target market, and exposure to the numerous decisions and elements of packaging design. Students must take their own notes of the content covered in the discussion, but professors could provide a handout if desired (e.g. for an intro class). Finally, students are provided a verbal overview of the up-coming assignment and a hard-copy of the worksheet. It is important to make students aware of the fact that they will be receiving feedback from their peers on their work, as this serves an additional motivational factor in the creation of their package design (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

Goal

The goal during the first stage of the activity is to get students thinking about the important role that packaging plays in branding, product positioning, etc. It is also crucial for students to understand how all elements of the marketing mix must work together. In addition, by showing them example packages from previous semesters and building up the importance of practicing creativity and its role in marketing (through previous assignments; or in the part I class session), the goal is to motivate students to produce a high-quality, unique product packaging—incorporating the elements discussed in class.

PART 2: PACKAGING PEER-EVALUATION

Basic Process

When the students come into the next class session, they spread their packaging examples and one-page marketing mix descriptions around the classroom. They are then provided with the peer-evaluation worksheet—one per packaging. The peer-evaluation worksheet (Appendix II) will stay with the packaging throughout the peer-review process. The class is kicked-off by explaining what we will do for the remainder of the time and providing clear expectations that they are to not only deliver feedback on what is good but also constructive criticism and creative ideas for others' packaging designs. They are told their feedback on each package, the packaging itself, and the 1-page marketing mix will be reviewed. Although I do not usually formally give them a grade for their peer-reviews, you could do so. Next, the activity starts by having them sit at someone else's packaging and providing their first peer review. Generally, students are given about 5 minutes for each review. Therefore, the peer review portion takes about 45-50 minutes of the class time ($5 * 8$ peer-reviews = 40 minutes + some time to rotate). To get the students to review 8 of their peer's works, professors can have them simply rotate around the room or have them start at a random package to start and then rotate in a specific way. Once all eight reviews are complete, the students return to their own packaging and are encouraged to spend some time reviewing the feedback provided and any ideas they may have gathered from viewing other people's packaging and marketing mixes. Student are given ~10-15 minutes to complete the review and finish up the last portion of the worksheet. In the last section, the feedback cycle is brought full-circle by asking them to self-reflect on how they would now improve and change their packaging if they could.

Information Provided

This portion focuses on how to conduct peer reviews and the type of critique they are expected to deliver. It is important that students provide not only "kudos" but also helpful insights for their peers to improve their packaging ideas. Some examples are provided verbally of the types of things they may provide feedback on—this dually serves as a reminder of elements and design features of "good" packaging.

Goal

The goal is for students to practice thinking critically about packaging and all of the decisions that go into it—by reviewing eight packages of their peers, plus re-assessing their own. In addition, students are able to practice both peer-assessment and self-assessment, which has been found to have benefits on learning outcomes, as such processes require additional critical thinking to occur (Black, Harrison, & Lee, 2004; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

Grading

To grade the student's assignment, they staple the feedback sheets to their marketing mix pages. In addition (during the class), the professor should take pictures of each side of the packages for later grading. Creative effort is examined along with general coverage of items that should be included on the packaging. Beyond initial coverage of the packaging elements, the instructor should also review the comments they received and their final, synthesized thoughts on how the packaging can be improved (i.e. did they accept any of the criticisms given, were they able to sort out the best ones to implement, etc.).

CHALLENGES & CONCERNS

Open Feedback

Some challenges may arise in terms of shy students providing feedback to others. It is important, beforehand, to clarify that just saying "good job" or what they like about the packaging is not sufficient feedback. I give them an example of what might constitute constructive criticism and encourage them to take this an opportunity to practice providing such feedback, as one is often required to do so in the working world. I also hint that I will be reviewing their comments as part of their grade, to ensure that they spend the time allotted.

Grading for Large Classes

During my first use of this activity, I ran into the problem of how I could gather up and bring back all of the packages to my office. If you cannot take pictures yourself, due to class size, I would suggest that you require the students to take their own images (1 of each side of the packaging) and submit them via your learning system for grading. Don't forget to grab a few of the best ones in class, though, for examples in future semesters.

Packaging Peer-Review in Larger Classes

Professors with larger classes could have students pass their packaging and handouts around versus having students move around a crowded lecture hall. One thing to keep in mind is to not use the individual directly by them, to reduce anxiety about providing feedback to someone who is reading over their shoulder. Remembering the passing sequence will be key for large classes, so that students can get their packaging back easily at end of the activity.

Time

Just as during tests, there will be quite a bit of variation in the time students take to review the packaging assignment and communicate their thoughts on it. I would start with 5 minutes and adjust organically, based on how the class seems to be moving along. For a 50 minute class, you may opt for only gathering 6 reviews per packaging, to ensure sufficient time for the packaging owner to review the critiques and wrap-up the assignment (e.g. collect papers, staple them, etc.).

ADAPTABILITY ACROSS MARKETING COURSES

While this activity was introduced in a marketing capstone course, it could be easily adapted to a principles of marketing course, retailing, or even a consumer behavior course. In a consumer behavior context, the focus may be on how the aesthetics of design affect consumer perceptions (Becker, van Rompay, Schifferstein, & Galetzka, 2011), whereas the retailing course may add in a Point-of-Purchase (POP) display section or thoughts on how to present the product (placement in store, which aisle, what price, whether or not to have a POP display). The students seemed to find the activity enjoyable primarily because of the creativity it required and the open way they were able to receive feedback from their peers and incorporate it. Any variation that sticks to these key elements will likely be well-received by the students and serve to accomplish the student learning objectives of applying the relevant theories, concepts, etc. and practicing creativity and constructive peer-evaluation and self-evaluation processes.

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APPENDIX 1
PART 1, OUTSIDE OF CLASS

Packaging Assignment: Due in Class _____

For this assignment, you will be creating your own packaging example for a food related item (e.g. cereal, crackers, popcorn, pop-tarts, coffee, pasta, etc.). Choose a creative food offering (your own brand and offering that is not currently offered on the market) and create the packaging and labeling for it. You will need to bring the packaging completed to the next class, along with a description of its target market and a brief description of the 4P's for the offering.

****I then create a category label or "area" with some blank space in between each for the following (as a reference for suggested length): 1. Target Market, 2. Product Description (brand name, use, competitive advantage/unique selling proposition), 3. Place, 4. Price, and 5. Promotion Ideas.*

Target Market:

Product Description (brand name, use, competitive advantage/unique selling proposition):

Place:

Pricing Structure:

Promotion Ideas:

**APPENDIX 2:
PART 2, IN-CLASS**

Review of Packaging Ideas: Activity

Student's Name (owner of packaging): _____

You will review the packaging ideas of 8 other individuals. Provide a critique of the packaging and write it below on each of the individual's sheets (e.g. ideas for better labeling, interactive pieces, different shapes or sizes, etc.).

Reviewer #1 Name: _____

Reviewer #2 Name: _____

Reviewer #3 Name: _____

Reviewer #4 Name: _____

Reviewer #5 Name: _____

Reviewer #6 Name: _____

Reviewer #7 Name: _____

Reviewer #8 Name: _____

How I would improve my packaging and changes I would make, based on the feedback provided to me:

****The box I provide here is generally about a half-page long to encourage them to spend some time synthesizing a follow-up critique of their work, to wrap up the activity.*