
10 Packaging Problems CPG Brands Should Avoid

The mistakes that quietly cost brands a shelf spot, a print run, or a retail listing, and exactly how to catch each one before it costs you anything.

BEFORE YOU READ THIS

You have three seconds. That's how long a shopper's eyes move across a shelf before they stop on a package, or don't.

In that window, your package has to do a job no ad, no sales rep, and no founder story can do it. Most packaging doesn't fail because a designer made something ugly. It fails because of ten specific, repeatable decisions made too early, too late, or not at all.

We see these on shelf or online. Each one below is fixable before it costs you a print run or a retail listing. They require catching the mistake before it's permanent.

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01

You designed before you audited the shelf

THE PAIN POINT

The brief starts with "here's our brand, make it look good," and the designer opens a blank file. Nobody has looked at what's already sitting on the shelf or online that your product needs to beat.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Packaging gets treated as a creative or logistics exercise instead of a competitive one. Marketers are close to their product and assume the story sells itself. It doesn't get the chance to, because the shopper never reads the story. They scan a shelf full of colors, shapes, and fonts and react to pattern before they react to content.

THE REAL COST

You end up with two failure modes, and both are expensive to discover after launch. Either your packaging looks so similar to the category leader that shoppers grab the familiar name out of habit, or it looks so different that it reads as a different category entirely and gets skipped. Either way, you paid full price for a design that competes with nothing, and connects with no one.

THE FIX

Before a single sketch, map the full competitive set you'll actually sit next to, not an aspirational one. Note what colors, typography, and claims repeat across the category, and where there's unclaimed visual space. That gap, not a mood board, is where your design should live.

02

The claim that actually sells your product is buried

THE PAIN POINT

Your strongest differentiator — low sugar, allergen-free, higher protein, whatever it is — sits in six-point type near the ingredient list instead of where a shopper's eye actually lands first.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Teams treat claims as copy to fit in wherever there's room, not as a design element with its own visual hierarchy. The founder knows the product's story so well that the claim feels obvious on the page, even when it isn't legible from arm's length.

THE REAL COST

You're paying for R&D, formulation, and a genuine point of difference, and then hiding it. A shopper who would have chosen your product for that exact reason never sees it and buys the familiar name instead. The purchase driver you built the product around never reaches the person it was built for.

THE FIX

Decide the one or two claims that actually change a buying decision, and design the front panel hierarchy around them: brand, product type, differentiator, in that order of visual weight. Test badge placement, color-blocking, and white space specifically for how fast that claim reads, not just whether it's present.

03

Your packaging lands in the muddled middle

THE PAIN POINT

The design isn't clearly mass-market and isn't clearly premium. It reads as generic because it's trying to signal both at once.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mass brands typically lean on saturated color and heavy product photography to feel abundant and familiar. Premium and natural brands typically lean on restraint, muted palettes, and clean type to feel considered and honest. When a design borrows a little from each camp without committing, it doesn't split the difference — it reads as neither.

THE REAL COST

Shoppers categorize instantly and unconsciously. A package that doesn't clearly signal its price and quality tier gets mentally filed as "unclear" and passed over, even when the product inside would have won a taste test.

THE FIX

Pick a lane deliberately, based on where your actual price point and ingredient story sit, then commit to that visual language completely: color saturation, photography versus illustration, type weight, claim density. A distinct position in an underserved space between two established camps can work. A blurry position between them does not.

04

Your SKUs blur together on the shelf

THE PAIN POINT

Your three flavors, or your three sizes, look like the same package with a different sticker. A shopper glancing at the shelf can't tell them apart at speed.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Line extensions get designed by duplicating the master file and swapping one color or icon, because it's faster and it keeps "brand consistency." But consistency and differentiation are different jobs, and a package that only does the first one fails the shopper who's trying to find a specific flavor or size.

THE REAL COST

Shoppers who want a specific variant either grab the wrong one and don't repurchase, or give up scanning and choose a competitor's instead, where the flavors are obviously different. You also lose shelf presence: five nearly identical packages can read as one block of color instead of five chances to catch the eye.

THE FIX

Build variant differentiation into the system from the start — distinct but related color-coding, clear flavor or format callouts, and a hierarchy that lets a shopper sort your own product line as fast as they sort it from competitors.

05

Your package fails the three-foot test

THE PAIN POINT

The brand name, the claim, or both are illegible at the distance a shopper actually stands from the shelf.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Design gets approved on a laptop screen or a printed proof held twelve inches from someone's face. Major retailers, including grocery chains that require labels to be readable from roughly three feet away for stocking and scanning purposes. They are working from an entirely different standard than the one most brands design against.

THE REAL COST

This isn't just a shopper problem — it's a retailer problem. Packaging that doesn't meet legibility and scanning standards can create friction with the buyer before it ever reaches a shelf, on top of losing the shopper who couldn't read it from three feet away in the first place.

THE FIX

Proof every design at actual scale, at actual shelf distance, under retail lighting, not on a screen. If you can't find your own brand, a distracted shopper with four other things on their list definitely can't.

06

You approved the design on taste, not on tested response

THE PAIN POINT

The final call on packaging came down to what the founder, the CEO, or the marketing lead personally liked best, not what an actual target shopper understood or preferred.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Consumer positioning testing costs money and time, many early-stage brands feel they don't have. It's easier to trust your own instinct, especially when you've lived with the product for months and the story feels self-evident to you.

THE REAL COST

Guessing wrong here means finding out too late, after the sale is lost or a retailer drops your product, that a fix requires a reprint instead of a simple revision.

THE FIX

Run positioning research on final representative designs, not rough concepts, before you commit to moving to final production. It's the cheapest insurance you'll buy in this entire process, and it turns a launch into a decision backed by evidence instead of a bet backed by conviction.

07

Your claims can't survive a legal review

THE PAIN POINT

Claims like "all natural," "no sugar added," "clean," or "healthy" are on your package because they sounded right, not because anyone checked whether they're defensible.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Government agencies have never formally defined many of the claims brands use most. That regulatory gap doesn't mean the claim is safe — it means the claim is a target. Class action firms actively monitor food and beverage labels for exactly this kind of undefined, unsubstantiated language, and major brands have been sued over claims that felt completely reasonable to the marketing team that approved them.

THE REAL COST

This is not hypothetical. Juice and beverage brands have faced class actions over "no added sugar" claims that plaintiffs argued were misleading given a product's total sugar content, and over "healthy" or "good for you" language paired with fruit imagery. A mislabeling suit costs far more than a label revision: legal fees, a potential relabel of existing inventory, and reputational damage with the exact health-conscious buyer you were trying to win.

THE FIX

Have every claim on the package reviewed against current regulatory guidance and known litigation patterns before you print, not after a demand letter arrives. If a claim can't be substantiated with data you can produce on request, rewrite it or drop it.

08

Your die line was built from a sample, not a spec

THE PAIN POINT

The mechanical file that goes to your printer was built off a prototype bottle, an early sample, or a stock template — not the finalized, production-accurate container.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Packaging development moves fast and in parallel. The label gets designed while the bottle or container is still being finalized, and nobody circles back to reconcile the two before the print order goes out.

THE REAL COST

When the container spec changes, even slightly, a die line built off the wrong reference doesn't wrap correctly, doesn't align at the seam, or leaves the wrong reveal at the neck or base. That mismatch is caught at the production line, not the design review, which means delayed shipments, wasted label stock, and a rush reprint at a premium rate right when you need to be filling shelves, not fixing files.

THE FIX

Build a die line from the final structure and print process, confirmed with your manufacturer and printer, and re-verify it every time the structure or print process changes even slightly. Production discipline here is boring. It's also the difference between hitting your ship date and missing it.

09

Your packaging isn't actually store-ready

THE PAIN POINT

The design looks finished, but it's missing something a retailer's receiving dock or scanning system needs: a properly sized and positioned UPC, visible case labeling, required warning or weight labeling, or case-pack information that matches what the retailer's system expects.

WHY IT HAPPENS

These requirements live in a retailer's vendor compliance documentation, not in a creative brief, and they're easy to miss when the design and operations conversations happen on separate tracks.

THE REAL COST

Store-readiness failures don't get caught in a design review. They get caught at the distribution center, and they come with real financial penalties: chargebacks, delayed or refused shipments, and in some cases a damaged relationship with a buyer you spent months earning. A retail listing you fought hard to win can become a liability in its first shipment.

THE FIX

Pull your target retailer's vendor packaging and labeling requirements before final art is locked, not after. Confirm UPC placement and scannability, case-pack labeling, and any format-specific requirements as part of the design sign-off, not as a separate afterthought owned by operations.

10

You designed for launch, not for what comes after launch

THE PAIN POINT

The packaging system works for SKU one. Nobody planned for SKU four, the new size, the seasonal flavor, or the day a competitor forces a refresh.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Early-stage packaging gets built around the immediate need: get this product on this shelf by this date. It's a reasonable priority under launch pressure, but it treats packaging as a single deliverable instead of a system that has to flex.

THE REAL COST

Every new SKU, size, or format becomes a from-scratch design project instead of an extension of an existing system. That's slower, more expensive, and it risks the brand drift that happens when each new package gets designed in isolation, by whoever's available, without the original strategy in the room.

THE FIX

Build the claims hierarchy, color logic, and layout structure as a system from the first SKU, with enough flexibility documented that a second, fifth, or tenth product can be added without reinventing the strategy each time.

The Pattern Underneath All Ten

None of these are creative or aesthetic problems. They're sequencing problems: strategy shortchanged, testing skipped, or production and legal requirements reconciled too late. Every one of them is less expensive to fix before production and more expensive to fix later.

If you're about to brief a designer, or you're holding a proof and wondering whether to approve it, run it against this list first:

- We audited the actual competitive shelf before designing anything
- Our strongest claim is visually prioritized, not just present
- Our visual tier (mass, premium, or the gap between) is a deliberate choice
- Every SKU in the line is instantly sortable from the others
- We've proofed the label at real shelf distance, not on a screen
- A real target shopper reacted to this design before we printed it
- Every claim has been checked against regulatory and FDA requirements, print specifications and litigation risk
- The artwork was built from final, confirmed package and printer specifications
- We've confirmed our target retailer's vendor packaging requirements
- The design system can absorb a new SKU without starting over



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