

Generic vs. Brand Name Food Packaging

Jane Liang
May 2, 2014

Introduction

Large grocery stores frequently manufacture cheaper, generic store brand versions of brand name food products. The aim of this project is to compare and contrast the packaging of generic and brand name food. I will be working with the assumption that brand name products exist prior to the store brand variants.

Does generic packaging tend to be is plainer and deemphasize brand name? My intuition and common sense says yes, but can this be quantified? Possible indicators include the presence or absence of images and graphics on the packaging; the size of the brand name in proportion to the rest of the package; and the frequency with which the brand name appears on the package.

Do generic store brands attempt to “mimic” brand packaging, or do they attempt to create their own recognizable brand? Compare and contrast the colors, fonts, package dimensions, and photo angles and positioning used in the generic and brand name packaging for a given product. Frequent mentions other products from the same brand may be a sign of generic products attempting to create their own brand.

Does brand name packaging more frequently feature sentimental back-stories, recipes, games, activities, and other such “bonus material” that doesn’t directly pertain to product nutritional/distribution information? I hypothesize that they do, especially for sentimental back-stories, but this may not be exclusively true.

Methods

I visited Safewayⁱ, Luckyⁱⁱ, and Trader Joe’sⁱⁱⁱ on February 14-17, 2014 to collect data. At each store, I photographed^{iv} all surfaces of brand name and generic food packages that fall under one or both of the following categories:

- A. generic products that have an easily recognizable brand name equivalent
- B. brand name products that are displayed alongside a generic product that is the only other equivalent buying option

The following exceptions aside, no available food products that qualify in one or both of the ways listed above were excluded from the study.

- I limited my study to only food products in sealed packages, since the aim of my research is to analyze product packaging.
- When multiple package sizes were available for a single product, I selected only one pair of the given generic and brand name packages using the following criteria: closeness in weight, followed by similarity in package shape, and finally favoring larger packages over smaller packages.
- Occasionally, multiple flavors or variants of the same product were available, in which case I chose to only obtain data from the products indicated as “original” or “traditional”.

I collected data from a total of 116 products, 109 of which were non-beverages. Of these 109 non-beverage products, 42 were brand name products and 67 were generic store brand products. Among the generic products were 20 Safeway Kitchens products, 33 Sunny Select products, 7 Malt-O-Meal products, 6 Trader Joe’s products, and 1 Valu-Time product.

When analyzing the results of this investigation, I eliminated beverages from the data set since the behavior of beverage packages is consistently unusual. The packaging for beverages,

unlike other food items, tends not to include images of the product and material other than the brand and product name.

Additionally, when I discuss the breakdown of generic brand products in this report, I group the products into four subcategories of generic brands: Safeway Kitchens, Sunny Select, Malt-O-Meal, and Trader Joe's. I do not include Valu-Time as a subcategory, because only one product in the data set was a Valu-Time product. Analysis of Valu-Time packaging would have little meaning since I only have access to one example of its products. The Valu-Time product is, however, included in the data analysis for all generic brand products.

After obtaining photographs of all relevant food products, I used Microsoft Office Excel and R programming language to organize and analyze my findings.

Results

Average Counts for Frequency of Brand and Product Names

	Brand	Generic	Safeway Kitchens	Sunny Select	Malt-O-Meal	Trader Joe's
Brand Frequency	3.690	4.507	4.85	4.182	5.858	4
Product Frequency	4.286	4.091	4.35	3.906	4.571	4
Ratio of Brand to Product Frequency	0.861	1.102	1.115	1.071	1.282	1

Percent of Products with Given Image Characteristics

	Brand	Generic	Safeway Kitchens	Sunny Select	Malt-O-Meal	Trader Joe's
Image in Motion	0.571	0.418	0.200	0.697	0.143	0
Branding Cartoon	0.476	0.045	0.100	0	0	0.167
Non-Food Image	0.357	0.299	0.250	0.424	0	0.167

Percent of Products with Additional Materials

	Brand	Generic	Safeway Kitchens	Sunny Select	Malt-O-Meal	Trader Joe's
Backstory	0.119	0.373	0.850	0.030	1	0
Recipe	0.095	0.409	0.579	0.455	0	0.167
Activity	0.405	0.313	0.250	0.424	0	0.333
Internet Participation	0.810	0.104	0	0	1	0
Phone Participation	0.119	0	0	0	0	0
Other Products	0.310	0.313	0.45	0.242	0.571	0

Percent of Generic Products that Match the Brand Name Equivalent

	All Generic Brands	Safeway Kitchens	Sunny Select	Malt-O-Meal	Trader Joe's
Package Color	0.522	0.35	0.606	0.714	0.5
Brand Font	0.180	0	0.273	0.429	0
Brand Font Color	0.731	0.8	0.727	0.571	0.667
Product Font	0.089	0	0.121	0.143	0.167
Product Font Color	0.298	0.250	0.303	0.571	0.167

Discussion

Compared to brand name goods, generic food packaging displays the brand of the product at a consistently higher frequency. Also, generic food packages contain a higher ratio of brand to product name frequency, with generic packaging slightly favoring brand over product and vice versa for brand name packaging. This suggests that generic brands may be more anxious to establish themselves as brands offering a multitude of other products. Additionally, the tendency of brand name products to reference product rather than brand name is perhaps the result of a specific product having more widespread recognition than the overall brand. (For example, the Oreo cookies have far more widespread recognition than the brand itself, Nabisco.)

With the exception of Malt-O-Meal, generic brands are far less likely to encourage consumers to interact with the company through internet or phone participation. I suspect that this trend is due to limited resources—generic brands may lack the funds to invest in developing a robust website or mobile phone app when these services are supplementary to their products.

Brand name packaging tends to incorporate “participatory” bonus material, such as printing a game or activity on the back of the box or asking consumers to visit a website or download a mobile phone app. Generic packaging pulls ahead for featuring backstories or recipes.

While I was surprised to learn that generic products tend to emphasize brand more than brand name products, I was less surprised to find that brand name products are several times more likely to have developed some sort of associated cartoon (such as the Keebler elves) to feature on packaging.

Beyond their shared tendency to heavily feature brand names, generic brand products are surprisingly diverse. There is usually some consistency within a given generic brand, but the behavior of product packages varies considerably for different brands.

With clean solid colors and serif fonts, Safeway Kitchens packaging radiates a subtle ambiance of tradition and sophistication. The lighting on the food images is soft and glowing. Most packages are also printed with the same Safeway Kitchens backstory—85.0% as opposed to the 37.3% of all generic products and the 11.9% of brand name products. Nearly half suggest other Safeway Kitchens products for the consumer to try.

Unlike other generic brands, Sunny Select favors displaying images of its food products in motion. While generic food packaging generally tends to feature stagnant bowls of cereal or

sedentary scatters of crackers, more than two-thirds of the food images on Sunny Select product packages are bursting or leaping or about to topple over.

Malt-O-Meal packaging is notable for its unusually high frequency of brand name. The brand name appears an average of 5.858 times on each package, compared to 4.507 for all generic packaging and 3.590 for brand name packaging. Unlike other generic brands, Malt-O-Meal consistently asks consumers to visit their online website. Like Safeway Kitchens, it also likes to reference a company back story and suggest other products from the brand.

Trader Joe's food products come in bright, eclectic packages that were entirely consistent in featuring product and brand names four times each. However, there was no readily discernable pattern in the kinds of image characteristics or bonus material the packaging tended toward.

In a 2002 article published by *The Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Robert L. Underwood and Noreen M. Klein discuss the effects of product pictures on consumer responses to packaging and brands^v. They argue that the presence of a product picture helps signal an extrinsic cue to customers to indicate product quality, which may be unclear to consumers due to their lack of familiarity with the brand or their insufficient ability to evaluate the product's intrinsic attributes. Based on this line of reasoning, generic packaging should strive to incorporate as much dynamic and stimulating imagery as possible, as consumers are less likely to be familiar with the quality of generic products (and are perhaps biased in believing that they are inferior). Sunny Select, which frequently features photographs of food cartoonishly bursting or leaping, particularly seems to subscribe to this notion. Safeway Kitchens, with its more calming, realistic food photographs might be interpreting this idea differently by attempting to stimulate consumers by evoking occasions spent enjoying cookies or a bowl of cereal.

In addition to the characteristics described in the results tables, I also collected data on what I felt upon first glance to be the "focus" of each product's packaging—whether the package draws the eye toward the brand name, the product name, the product's image, etc. I have omitted the data from this report because I felt that it was not very reliable, since subjectively judging the "focus" of each package was dependent only on my individual perceptions. Naturally, I harbor plenty of biases (such as assumptions about how generic and brand name products behave) and after attempting to determine the "focus" of over a hundred products, my reliability has most likely diminished and grown inconsistent. Nevertheless, I still think that the "focus" of food packaging is an interesting topic that could perhaps be better studied by running large surveys and asking multiple people to judge the "focus" rather than relying on one person's opinion.

ⁱ 1500 Solano Ave, Albany, CA 94706

ⁱⁱ 1000 El Cerrito Plaza, El Cerrito, CA 94530

ⁱⁱⁱ 225 El Cerrito Plaza, El Cerrito, CA 94530

^{iv} Sample photographs taken to collect data from food packaging can be found below:



^v Underwood, Robert L. and Noreen M. Klein, "Packaging as Brand Communication: Effects of Product Pictures on Consumer Responses to the Package and Brand," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Fall 2002): 58-68.

Title page word cloud of text found on the product packaging used in this study was generated courtesy of wordle.net