

# Shelf Improvement

Grocery-store generics that stand apart from famous brands — by design.



## Publix Aluminum Foil

As store-brand, or “private label,” products have grown in popularity over the years, package design has been part of the story. The private-label message: This store-brand canned corn or box of aluminum foil is just as good as the nearby Green Giant Niblets or Reynolds Wrap (but cheaper). Thus the store-brand packaging tends to look like the famous-name product’s packaging — simultaneously borrowing from the familiarity created by branding and trying to undercut its power. Imitation in this case is not a form of flattery but of subtle persuasion.

The private-label packaging strategy of Publix, an 878-store chain of groceries in several Southern states, is striking precisely because it eschews this familiar strategy. Instead of echoing brand-name designs, Publix’s products have their own look: clean, clever and — with lots of white space and simple but crisp typography — vaguely upscale. This has won Publix praise not just from publications like *Package Design Magazine* and *Private Label Buyer* but also from *HOW*, a graphic-design business magazine, which named Publix “in-house design group of the year” in 2005.

Of course, Publix did not set out to win awards from design magazines but rather to win the attention of shoppers. Tim Cox, director of the company’s in-house creative-service department, says Publix’s house brands used to mimic the look of national brands;

the problem was that imitation made the private-label stuff blend in. A breakthrough came with the conclusion that similarity was no longer necessary. For most consumers, the knee-jerk suspicion of “generic” products faded a long time ago. “We’re not really relying on the customer seeing a package of canned goods and saying, ‘Oh, that looks like the national brand, that must be good,’” Cox says. And the more you expand the definition of generic brands, the more true that is. He argues that, in a way, his store’s brand could be as viable as something like those of the Gap or Pottery Barn — retailers that have made names by selling their own goods rather than by rounding up famous-name products made by others. “Those are considered to be reliable brands that people relate to and think are high quality,” he says, “so why can’t supermarkets do that, too?”

Cox’s department set out to create a style that would “separate itself from what else is happening on the shelf.” If most packaging screams “look at me” with bright, colorful, busy graphics, one response is to go the opposite way, with a spare look. And while all of Publix’s house-brand products (which are in pretty much every category you can think of) share a basic look, there is also variation. The canned vegetables show a spoon with

a few peas or corn kernels, like a shot from a food magazine. Boxes of garbage bags have more amusing pictures of a dog sniffing a trash can. The aluminum foil boxes — included in *HOW* magazine’s spread on Publix — feature little animals (a turtle, a swan, a moose) made of foil. The image changes depending on the message for the category (no jokey pictures on medicine packages, of course) but gives the designers some flexibility, Cox says. “The tinfoil has been very popular,” he adds. “And the intent was for the customer to say, ‘Oh, I get it,’ and they can stand there and smile. If you can engage with them on that level, it’s a different means of interaction.”

Bryn Mooth, the editor of *HOW*, says that while there’s something retro about the look, harking back to the black-and-white generic packaging of the 1970’s, the result feels high end. It ends up being “incredibly distinctive on the store shelf,” she observes. (Mooth also points out that *HOW* generally recognizes more rarefied design involving unique materials and limited production runs, or goods from stores like Target, which are associated with design; grocery-store-brand boxes of foil don’t usually stand out.) The interesting upshot is that walking through a Publix store, you end up spending a lot of time looking at the Publix products and presumably thinking about the fact that you’re in Publix — a hard thing to pull off at a time when grocery stores themselves often seem interchangeable. In other words, the store’s design team has not abandoned the power of design as a branding tool; they have seized it. ■