How Brands Deceive Customers With Packaging — And Why It Always Backfires

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of Packaging Resources   June 2025

Packaging has always been a brand's first salesperson. It communicates value, builds trust, and influences purchase decisions long before a consumer interacts with the product. But there's a darker side to the discipline—one where packaging becomes a tool for deception rather than clarity.

As someone who's lived in the packaging world my entire life—literally *born with a plastic spoon in my mouth*—I've watched brand teams push right up to the ethical line, and sometimes well beyond it. Deceptive packaging may generate short-term gains, but the long-term damage to brand reputation, retailer confidence, and consumer trust is far greater.

Here's a deep dive into the most common packaging deceptions—and real-world examples of how brands mislead customers every day.

1. Shrinkflation (Selling Less for the Same Price)

This is the classic, quiet tactic: reduce the amount of product while keeping the package—and the price—nearly the same.

Common examples:

- **Cereal boxes** that keep the same footprint but lose 1–3 oz of product.
- **Candy bars** that shrink 10–20% but maintain identical wrapper size.
- **Ice cream containers** reduced from 64 oz → 56 oz → 48 oz over the past decade.
- **Toilet paper rolls** going from 280 sheets to 250 to 220 while still labeled "Mega Roll."

Brands defend shrinkflation as a cost-control measure, but consumers see it for what it is: stealth inflation.

2. Oversized Packaging to Exaggerate Perceived Value

Large boxes with minimal product inside are one of the oldest tricks in the book.

Typical offenders:

- **E-commerce electronics:** A tiny adapter in a box big enough for a paperback book.
- **Health supplements:** A bottle half-filled with capsules, padded with a giant cotton tuft.
- **Cosmetics:** Creams or serums housed in thick plastic shells that hide a tiny inner chamber.
- **Snack foods:** Chip bags filled to 30–40% and the rest is air ("slack fill"), often defended as cushioning.

While some slack fill is functional, many packages are intentionally oversized to communicate "more."

3. "Natural," "Organic," and "Eco-Friendly" Greenwashing

Brand teams frequently lean on imagery and color—especially green—to imply sustainability without meaningful environmental changes.

Examples of greenwashing packaging:

- **Plastic bottles dyed green**, marketed as "earth-friendly" although the dye makes them harder to recycle.
- **Paper-wrapped plastic**, where a thin paper shell hides nearly full-plastic structure.
- **Compostable claims** on packaging that requires commercial-only composting—accessed by fewer than 10% of U.S. consumers.
- **Molded fiber trays** with hidden PFAS coatings marketed as "all natural."

Consumers see brown kraft paper and assume "eco," even when the product's environmental impact hasn't changed.

4. Faux Premiumization (Packaging That Pretends the Product Is Better Than It Is)

Brands often use heavy materials or elaborate structures to simulate quality.

Classic examples:

- **Extra-thick glass bottles** for spirits that make the product look more expensive and feel heavier in the hand.
- **Rigid paperboard boxes** around inexpensive products, adding perceived value without improving the product.
- **Cosmetics jars** with thick double-walls that create the illusion of more product.
- Premiumization isn't inherently deceptive—but when packaging is engineered to look premium while the product stays low-quality, it crosses the line.

5. Misleading Photography and Illustrations

What you see is not always what you get.

Common deceptive visuals:

- **Breakfast cereals** showing bowls loaded with fruits not included or barely present inside.
- **Frozen meals** depicted as dense, hearty portions vs. a half-filled tray.
- **Fast food packaging** showing towering burgers that look nothing like the compressed reality.
- **Protein bars** showing glossy chocolate coats or whole nuts that simply aren't in the bar.

Regulators have pursued false imagery claims before—but most misleading visuals live in the gray zone.

6. Hidden Plastic in "Paper-Based" Packaging

Brands increasingly advertise "paper packaging," especially for sustainability. But many of these structures are paper-*coated* plastics or multi-layer laminations.

Real-world examples:

- **Paper straws with plastic liners** (sometimes intentionally undisclosed).
- **Paper cups** always lined with polymer barriers but marketed as "recyclable."
- **Flexible pouches** promoted as recyclable yet made of multilayer films incompatible with most recycling facilities.

Consumers think "paper = good," but the hidden layers tell a different story.

7. Manipulated Serving Sizes

Packaging and nutrition labels are designed to make products look healthier than they are.

Examples:

- **Chips and snacks** labeled as "120 calories per serving," with one bag actually holding 3–4 servings.
- **Beverages** declared "100 calories per serving," but the bottle contains 2.5 servings.
- **Instant ramen** promoted as "low fat," but only per half-block serving—nobody eats half.

It's not technically illegal—just misleading by design.

8. "Window Dressing" Packaging

Transparent windows or shaped cavities can exaggerate quantity or hide empty space.

Examples:

- **Pastry boxes** where the window shows the best-looking product but hides inconsistent pieces behind it.
- **Blister packs** engineered with cavities that make items look larger.
- **Chocolate boxes** where the tray's depth makes the pieces seem more substantial.

This tactic blends industrial design with psychological manipulation.

9. Multi-Packs Designed to Inflate Value Perception

Brands use packaging count and structure to manipulate value.

Examples:

- **12-packs** that contain smaller or lighter units than the perceived norm.
- **"Family size" bags** that are barely larger than standard sizes.
- **Cosmetics multi-packs** combining one full-size item with "bonus" minis to inflate perceived value.

Consumers often discover the truth only after purchase.

10. "Refill Packs" That Aren't Actually More Economical

Household goods often sell "refill packs" or "eco-refills," but the price-per-ounce doesn't always align.

Examples:

- **Cleaning product refills** where cost per ounce is higher than the original bottle.
- **Shampoo/conditioner pouches** that offer less volume at equal or higher pricing.
- **Foodservice condiments** marketed as "bulk refills" but costing more per unit than standard jugs.

Refills are often a marketing play—not a savings.

Why This Matters for Brands

Deceptive packaging erodes trust. And trust is the currency of modern CPG.

For your clients—retailers, foodservice brands, manufacturers—the risks include:

- **Loss of customer loyalty**
- **Increased returns and lower lifetime value**
- **Social media backlash and viral call-outs**

- Regulatory scrutiny
- Difficulty defending pricing strategies

Consumers today are more informed than ever. They compare, measure, photograph, and post everything. Packaging deception is harder to hide—and easier to punish.

How Ethical, Transparent Packaging Wins

As a packaging consultant, I guide brands toward strategies that build trust:

- Right-size packaging based on real product volume
- Use honest imagery
- Provide clear sustainability metrics (not buzzwords)
- Avoid unnecessary structural gimmicks
- Highlight value through product quality—not illusions
- Communicate truthfully about serving sizes and net contents

Honesty scales. Deception does not.