

Packaging: Finding the Universal Fit

A physical re-design to open up a new line of business

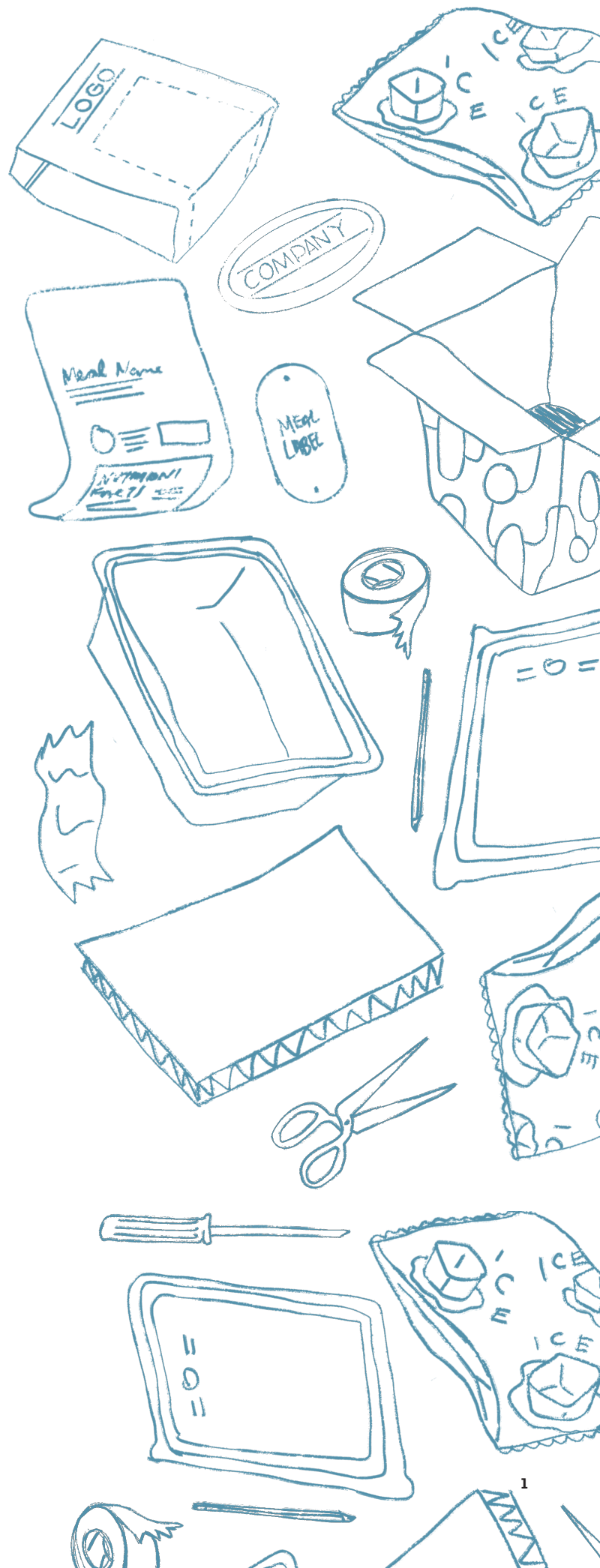
GENERAL BACKGROUND

Company A is a prepared meals business working nationally in the United States since 2011. The business operates by working with local chefs, restaurants and brands, to sell a direct-to-consumer (D2C) meal product twice a week to customers. The deliveries of these meals are handled in two ways: locally (supported through company employed drivers) and regionally (supported through UPS). Both types of meal products are cooked/prepared by chefs and then packaged by third-party teams called 'pick-and-packs'.

In 2021, the organization decided that in order to expand the business, they should strategically open a new business-to-business (B2B) product line. Additional organizations would be sold on a personalized variant of the products that they could externally own and market, while *Company A* continued to manage both their own business and the overall internal systems. As it was conceived, all of the parties involved would need to use the same physical and digital materials to keep cost relatively low, but each company/partner would have some form of ownership over these tools aesthetically.

THE CHALLENGE

As the lead brand designer for *Company A*, I needed to create packaging (boxes, materials, and meal containers) that felt premium for legacy brand customers as well as new brands and their customer bases, all-the-while remaining brand neutral to allow for production efficiency.



STAKEHOLDERS



INTERNAL

Company A

- Legacy brand
- 10+ year customer base
- Rebrand implemented about a year prior

MUST HAVES

- Meal-level branding
- Premium feel



EXTERNAL

Chefs

- Designing and producing the meal offerings
- Physically completing some of the packaging

MUST HAVES

- Identity and creative ownership over the product



EXTERNAL

Pick-and-pack (PnP)

- Doing the bulk of the manual labor involved in packaging
- Handling boxing of meals
- Final touch-point pre-delivery

MUST HAVES

- Ability to quickly execute
- Minimum dexterity needed (gloved hands)
- Min. Storage of materials



EXTERNAL

New Companies

- White-labeling boxes and meal containers used by *Company A*
- Exposing new customers to prepared meals (possibly for the first time)
- Hoping to expand their brand footprint and diversify revenue

MUST HAVES

- Meal-level branding
- Premium feel



MIXED

Delivery

- Driving meals to their delivery locations
- Third-party vendors and internal stakeholders

MUST HAVES

- Durable external packaging
- Clear labeling
- Maneuverable Boxes



EXTERNAL

Customers

- End consumers of the D2C meal products
- Ordering a premium product and looking to have that experience felt all the way through the order experience

MUST HAVES

- Allergens clearly labeled
- Clear labeling (externally)
- Branded and engaging experience
- Easily store-able products

TIMELINE AND CONSTRAINTS

Project timelines were dictated by the launch of our beta B2B customers, our stock of existing materials, and our production lead-time to produce our new materials. Because of these factors, it was determined that I would have two months to produce new design concepts. This timeline allowed for a small amount of flexibility while still allowing for print production to be completed, proofed, and reviewed before a full scale roll-out.

As a result of our budgetary and spacial/storage constraints, it was also determined that our team would need to keep in mind the amount of variable products we could produce. This meant we were going to aim to produce as few variations of design solutions to keep our total number of manageable assets to as few as possible while still making each company feel as though their brand voice was being communicated at the individual product level.

INITIAL PROCESS AND STRATEGY

After our teams' initial conversations discussing the overall project objectives, we realized that this could be an excellent moment to try to resolve some of our more broader challenges including friction at the packing level and the breakdown of materials in transport.

For context, our Customer Support team had been experiencing an increasing number of calls regarding cracked meal containers. From here, our Director of Supply Chain and Fulfillment began sourcing new meal containers which, in turn, unlocked the possibility to revisit the internal cold-keeping packaging within the boxes. This changed the internal dimensions of the box contents, which changed the external box dimensions required to get meals to their customers while maximizing our pack-out space within the box to reduce products tumbling about during transport.

Then, through conversations with our Food Safety team, I realized there was another point of frustration at the Chef/meal-prep level of the operation: meals were not being sealed by these producers. This meant that meals could be tampered with post-exit of the prep facilities.

Needless to say, these discoveries continued throughout the process in various manors.

For my design solutions, I began by collecting all of these concerns and 'must-haves' first into a gridded notebook, and then an Adobe Illustrator file to help better understand how I was going to resolve all (or most) of these challenges through our redesign.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH

Using a combination of Coda.io and Asana, I laid out each of my deliverables:

- The meal packaging
- The meal labels
- Cold-keeping safety trackers (TTI)
- Shipping boxes

Each of these was then given sub-tasks of:

- Concepting/Ideation
- Rough drafts or physical mock-ups
- Final Options

Our success criteria became clear as I began these early iterations: **each component of this packaging had to feel premium while still remaining brand neutral** to allow for any new company/partner to create their own personalized D2C business-line of prepared meals.

Through conversations with our initial beta partners, I was able to determine that this would come to life through strategic uses of their logo and brand identities on-top of simple and well-designed packaging.

It was this research that led to the first concepts which were physically produced and applied onto several meal container options. These real world tests included adding meals to the containers, filling containers with water to test leaking, and applying/re-applying labels to test application viability. This testing was not only helpful in the abstract, but it directly contributed to the acceleration of our delivery timelines by giving all members of the team a clear understanding of what solutions would work in the longterm.

TEAM WORK AND COORDINATION

Through cross-functional partnerships within the organization, I was able to closely work with the folks that each represented an important touch-point in the delivery process.

I was able to walk through one of our physical locations where meals were both prepared and packaged. I got first-hand experience using the tools required to print our labels at-scale and observe how the line of workers handled the product organization and distribution to ensure the correct meals were placed into their respective orders and then loaded onto the trucks for delivery.

It was because of these hands-on interactions that I was able to better empathize with the folks who were implementing my design solutions at each phase of the process. From the Food Safety regulators, to our drivers, and even our end-consumers, I intentionally positioned myself in a manner that allowed me to observe first-hand what the complete product life cycle looked like.

THE WORK OF THE WORK

Logistically, this project certainly proved challenging. So much so, that I would say maybe the “easiest” parts were the actual designing of the materials.

I used a combination of my skill-sets to create what ultimately ended up being our final

deliverables. I laid out multiple iterations of the label designs, created lists of all of the necessary elements, digitally rendered a myriad of options for each piece in pre-production software, wrote copy for our external packaging, and even helped source some of our physical packaging to make sure that it fit within the desired product guidelines.

What was eventually devised was a meal label applied at the Chef level and then a secondary branded sticker applied at the final packaging stage (PnP) to distinguish brand identity on the individual product. Chefs are provided rolls of meal labels and their application of these labels seals the product to comply with food safety standards.

Production of the labels on a by-delivery basis is the responsibility of the internal teams at *Company A*. Thus, the product and engineering teams were included to partner and produce a digital tool to create these labels. The program devised by these teams allowed our culinary managers to input meal data into a system that would produce our two templated meal labels.

To solve for varying order pool sizes of each company, I created one meal label with branding printed directly onto it and one without brand identifiers. For companies with fewer customers, the non-branded labels get a secondary touch at pick-and-pack while the companies with larger pools only require one touch-point at the chef labeling level. This solution reduced friction for chefs and minimized added costs from our packaging teams by efficiently solving the need to label each product individually.

Boxes were conceived to not include any distinguishing brand marks but all are wrapped in playful instructional text to communicate personality to consumers. Temperature index cards are included on packages being shipped through third-party vendors and also lack specific branding but ensure consumer confidence in the safety of the meals.

IMPACT AND IMPLEMENTATION

I am proud to say that through the teams' dedication, we were able to create packaging that met the majority of the stakeholder criteria. We were able to roll-out each element on-time and increase each of our beta partners overall customer experience. In total, I completed (1) box design, (2) variations of meal labels, (1) templated branded sticker for partner packaging and (1) cold keeping card.

Challenges post implementation have included:

- Partners wanting more control over branded elements
- Uneven execution of branded elements at various stages of production

However, these issues aside, it has been a direct result of this branded packaging that our organization has been able to bring in larger partners and expand the business even more. In the last year, the team has expanded from three beta partners to ten brands, all while maintaining the legacy brand of *Company A*.

LESSONS LEARNED

Although we met all of our criteria, I am confident that this process (like all good design) is never truly complete. There are always opportunities to iterate and grow to fit the existing and future needs of a project. Originally, when I was first approached about this project, there were predetermined label dimensions to fit our former packaging. Through questioning, I was able to discern that in fact we weren't wedded to this assumption of what the label had to be. It is because of this exploration that we realized all of the other components of the physical product journey had the potential to be adjusted.

It's these types of insights I learn from questioning assumptions at every stage of a project that I think inform design decisions that make a tangible difference in the end result of a project.

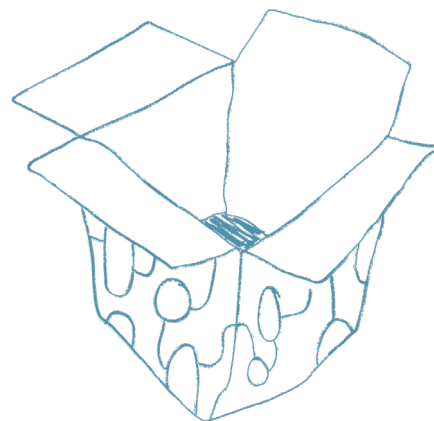
If I could offer any feedback to myself:

- Assume nothing is set in stone
- Document everything because you WILL forget something
- Admit when you're wrong and quickly iterate
- Lean on your subject matter experts but understand your skill-set is in the room for a reason

If I could go back and start this project over, I would try to:

- Insert myself at an even earlier stage of the initial process
- More closely associate myself with the print-team to better understand the physical production limitations
- Document more of the process/learnings more thoroughly

Ultimately, I'm exceptionally proud of this project and it's overall outcomes. Our teams have continued to iterate on our product solutions from both a physical and digital perspective. It makes me excited to know that each stakeholder in this project had a voice and unique perspective in the eventual outcome and I hope to carry that forward to many more projects to come.



WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS LOOK LIKE?



Marketing/promotional shoot of meal packaging and box designs pre-project

Color Guide For Your Meal Safety

Place TTI sticker here

This TTI (Time and Temperature Indicator) sticker provides information ensuring optimal cold keeping during transit. Please use the color chart to identify the color of your sticker before consuming these meals.

Safe to Eat
(Product has NOT been compromised by time/temp. exposure)

25%	40%

Anything in the green-to-yellow has not been compromised and is safe to eat.

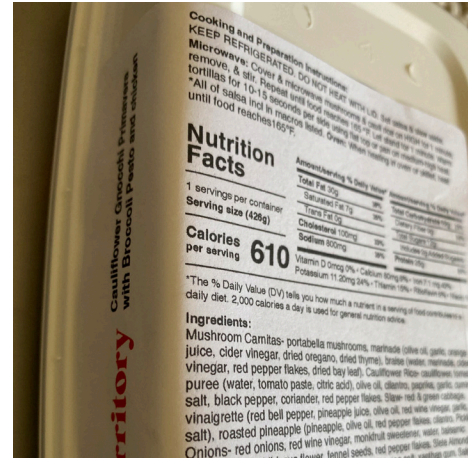
DO NOT EAT
(Product COULD HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED by time/temp. exposure)

100%	120%	0% NOT ACTIVATED

Do not use the product.

Do not use the product if label is white. It has not been activated

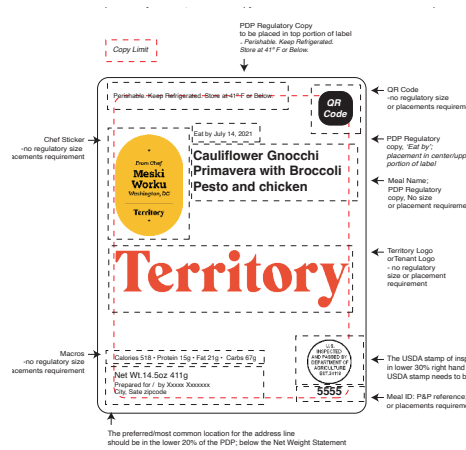
Time and Temperature Indicator (TTI) card to be included in all regionally shipped products to ensure food safety.



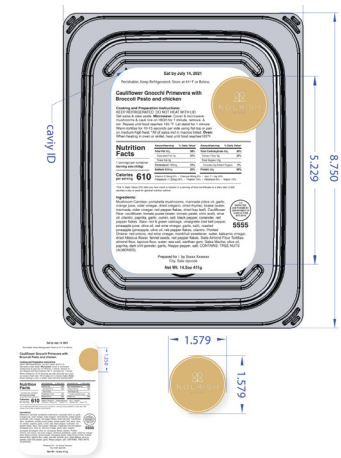
Physical testing of meal labels on prototype packaging to understand how meals will appear when stacked in a customer's fridge



Real-world testing of packaging to better understand constraints/limitations while assessing other areas branding could live



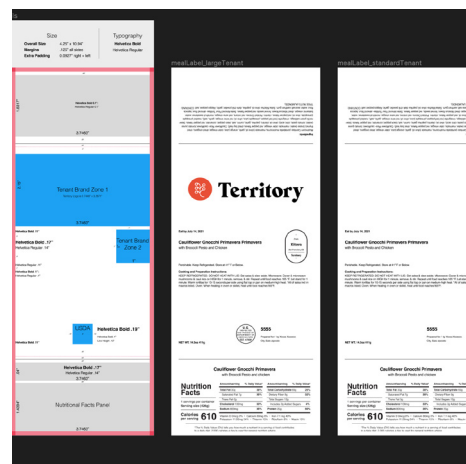
Regulatory checks to ensure food safety materials such as weight, nutritional facts, and 'eat by' dates were clearly defined.



Exploration of various options to include brand identifiers while reducing touch-points



Box design and iterations (digital production proofs)



(left to right) Digital label specs for engineers, final concepts with branding, and brand agnostic label. All created using Figma.



Customer photo of updated meal packaging showing branding of Company A