

LIFT YOUR BRAND, BUNDLE YOUR PRODUCT: HOW FOOD NETTING TRANSFORMS MEAT & PROTEINS

Decorative and functional food netting can revamp protein packaging strategies, refresh merchandising options and create powerful brand awareness and recognition with consumers.

In a world of me-too products, establishing and maintaining brand awareness can be a complex proposition for protein processors. But for high-competition products like chicken, ham, lunch meats, cheese and other prepared foods, the relationship between product branding and packaging has never been more critical.

Packaging has been referred to as a consumer packaged goods company's "hardest working employee" and "a true brand ambassador," by Kaylor Hildenbrand, principal consultant for PARK Research Partners, Winter Springs, Florida, and an advocate for the consumer product packaging industry.

On a similar note, Beth Bloom, senior food and drink analyst for market intelligence agency Mintel, observes, "The majority of consumers are paying attention to package format and design, and purchase drivers are either being directly related to or being communicated through packaging."

If these observations are true, then protein processors already facing packaging challenges related to product quality may find the branding and merchandising benefits of packaging an additional challenge.

For many processors, the next frontier of meats and protein packaging—boosting the brand while protecting the product—is a topic that many companies don't seem to think much about. But in the face of rising competition, perhaps they should.

In fact, there are several ways protein processors can give new consideration to improving brand awareness when marketing and merchandising their products. One option is a material that brings more to the table than many processors realize. It's food netting, a material that

offers not only form and function, but also design and use flexibility, all with the goal of boosting the brand.

FOOD NETTING: A PACKAGING PRIMER

Food netting can challenge the packaging status quo by allowing a company to truly differentiate its products from the competition at retail.

Many meat and protein processors may be unaware of the full range of capabilities food netting offers, or that its effects are more than superficial. The reality is that netting offers untold design flexibility and a range of unique packaging characteristics not found from other packaging materials. These knitted or extruded packaging materials are available in a variety of materials, including polyester, polypropylene, plastic and cotton/polyester blends. They can be used either during product processing to form, texture and shape the product, or as a decorative outer packaging for spotlighting, merchandising and handling products.

Through all of these capabilities, netting can help to make a processor's product stand out from the crowd in unlimited ways. It also works in concert with other types of packaging, such as shrink bags and colored foils, to help bundle products or create a fresh and thoughtful merchandising option that complements a brand's identity.



OPTIONS WITH DECORATIVE NETTING

Companies that can make their products look different at retail, while providing strong product visibility, have a better chance of generating higher retail sales. This is especially apparent considering that their competition may not be putting a great deal of thought into optimized branding through packaging. Overwrapping products with decorative netting is just one solution. It can impart a higher perceived value, convey a specific product attribute, and allow the processor to bundle its product with others that are similar or complementary to that product.

Premium decorative netting can be used in a variety of ways to enhance or reinforce a product's brand image. Because decorative netting is highly

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customizable in terms of color, tagging and closure options, it allows processors to complement or mirror their product branding. Clips and loops on netting allow for the placement of creative tags. An unusual tag attached or clipped to netting will stand out from competitive products carrying only a label, and it offers yet another opportunity to provide additional product information, such as a recipe or product serving ideas.

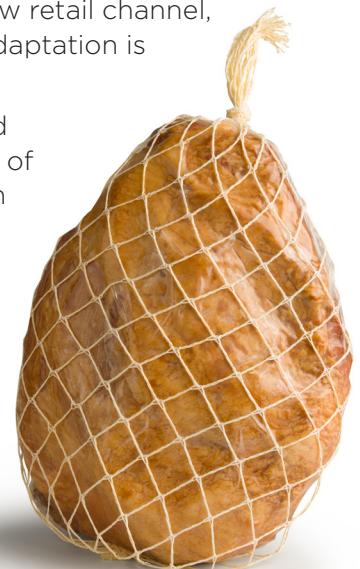
In these ways, decorative netting also can establish or reinforce a specific product image. Take for example a supplier of premium Italian Capicola supplied in shrink-wrapped chubs. By adding a layer of brightly colored decorative netting, that processor may be able to reinforce or strengthen the product's old world, artisan or high quality brand presentation. In this case, the netting can even be designed with a decorative loop so the product can be hung behind the deli counter or in a window, just like in a real Italian market. Against a shelf of competitors, brightly colored netted products are more likely to stand out with quality-conscious consumers. Those consumers who associate this unique netted packaging with the brand will be more likely to ask for it by name.

Because decorative netting is highly customizable in terms of color, tagging and closure options, it allows processors to complement or mirror their product branding.

Decorative netting also offers the unique ability for consumers to see the product inside, so they can feel more confident about product quality. Packaging that obscures branding on the product itself is problematic, particularly in light of the growing consumer demand to see the products they are buying. Netting allows a product's intrinsic brand packaging and features to shine through, while reinforcing that branding through strategic color and pattern selection.

Decorative netting lets processors tap into another industry trend: adapting an existing retail product to be sold in a new retail channel, such as in club stores. In many cases, this product adaptation is accomplished simply through packaging.

Traditional repackaged product bundles are executed with little more than a plastic shrink overwrap on top of the existing packaging. This practice may accomplish the intended bundling effect, but it does little to showcase the product's brand image, and may even obscure existing branding or the products themselves. Because so many processors have chosen to bundle their products in this way, this technique also does not help one bundled product stand out from another on store shelves. In the midst of intense product competition, a hastily executed packaging plan can actually undermine a brand's appeal in the eyes of consumers.



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Rather than using an existing cardboard product or additional plastic packaging, netting leverages a material that keeps the product visible and differentiates it on the shelf. At the same time, it's also an appealing merchandising option in the new retail channel. Examples include bundled packages of presliced lunch meat, blocks of cheese, and cured meats like salami. Manufacturers of these products can bundle two or more items together for sale at the club channel, and make the entire bundle stand out from other bundled products in the same category.

Bundling products need not be limited to combining like items. Take for instance a processor able to bundle hot dogs with buns into a "Picnic Pack" within a single custom-colored and tagged decorative net bag. The net bag packaging allows these products, normally merchandized in different sections of a store, to be displayed together. This not only provides greater convenience for customers seeking a fast product solution, it also potentially increases sales of both products.

Greater cross-merchandising flexibility is another key benefit of decorative netting. For example, netted bags of peanut butter, salsa or hummus snack cups can potentially be merchandised in large bins near the produce aisle, or hung on a carousel, as opposed to placement in their usual place on a cooler shelf. This means the products get visibility in an area of the store where competitive products are not on display.

Although some processors may be hesitant to use decorative netting, citing concerns about higher cost compared to an existing shrink packaging, decorative food netting can help a brand outsell the competition, generating more revenue for processors and retailers. In this respect, the rewards may far outweigh the higher costs.

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HOW FUNCTIONAL NETTING ADDS PRODUCT APPEAL

Functional netting also can be used to create unique product appeal, by imparting pattern, texture, form, shape and colors to products.

Process nets used during the cooking process for deli meats and hams, for example, can take advantage of unique, proprietary knitted patterns to tell a specific brand story. Even though the functional netting is removed



before the product is packaged for sale, the unique texture remains on the product, offering a new dimension when it comes to product differentiation and branding on the shelf. This creates the opportunity for processors to add another layer of unique product appeal, through pattern, that reflects the brand image and resonates with consumers.

Traditional process netting has centered around the box pattern, the familiar rectangular pattern that appears on many deli meat products and hams. However some processors may want to utilize a much more distinctive, complementary, and meaningful pattern that relates to the product's brand attributes and flavors. Suppliers may be surprised to learn that many other options besides the familiar square box patterns exist. The range of unique, intricate and cutting-edge patterns now available in processing netting is greater than ever. Some of the designs can even be licensed exclusively to one processor. It's a strategy of particular value to those processors seeking to communicate the unique attributes or premium nature of their product over others in the marketplace.

Brand-savvy processors may find that proprietary patterned functional netting can keep them on the leading edge in terms of pattern and design, and send a strong signal to consumers that their products are truly different.

Thanks to the acquisition and development of proprietary technologies, Flavorseal is able to create a wide variety of functional net patterns to impart distinctive shapes and patterns to meats, mirroring the brand, style or flavor of the product. Consider, for example, a glazed roast emblazoned with a pineapple pattern by way of process netting. The pattern and texture make it easy for the consumer to identify a brand in the deli case without an outer package or sign. Patterns like this have the power of conveying not only that certain products are different, but also how they are different.

While adopting unique, innovative texture patterns may not be appropriate for every product, brand-conscious processors who need a distinctive competitive edge can certainly benefit from innovative functional netting. Under pressure from intense competition trying to copy their products, brand-savvy processors may find that proprietary patterned functional netting can keep them on the leading edge in terms of pattern and design, and send a strong signal to consumers that their products are truly different.

HOW TO INCORPORATE FOOD NETTING

Adding decorative and/or process netting to a product does not have to be costly or time-intensive. Suppliers like Flavorseal specialize in this process and are happy to offer consultative design advice for protein processors.

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Processors interested in considering a packaging “makeover” or bundling option can contact Flavorseal for consultative advice and to sample a range of options possible with both decorative and functional netting that could work with their products. For those seeking a specific look and design, Flavorseal works with partners to develop netting solutions that convey certain attributes.

The company has developed a survey process, based on its years of experience in developing and innovating food netting for functional and decorative applications. This survey helps to uncover packaging challenges and issues that may be restraining a processor’s sales. When it comes to functional and process netting, the company has developed a range of new, unconventional and even exclusive patterns to help processors differentiate their products and build brand awareness. Flavorseal also encourages customers to test different patterns and types of functional netting, as it can be difficult for processors to visualize patterns and textures until after product processing.

Flavorseal’s product experts also work with clients to develop exclusive patterns aligned to a specific brand’s image, flavor, and texture. Many of the newest patterns created are unique from anything else on the market today. The company’s in-house manufacturing and design capabilities allow the blending of existing patterns as well as the development of new ones.

The company also develops customized decorative netting bundle or packaging solutions to impart a higher perceived value or premium brand image. In many cases, the cost of the decorative netting may be lower than the packaging materials previously in use. The product and technical support specialists at Flavorseal work with customers to make these changes smoothly and cost-efficiently from an equipment and processing point of view. Technical specialists also help to ensure that new functional netting products will run smoothly on the processor’s existing lines.

Ultimately, wisely chosen functional and decorative netting products can offer large-scale benefits in branding, differentiation and product sales. When processors consistently work to make their products look different on store shelves, while also providing products that consumers repeatedly enjoy and value, consumers will reward these organizations with loyalty and repeat business.

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