

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 47: Trader Joe's Designs Delicious

Tara: Here's a preview of this episode of Inside Trader Joe's.

[Preview montage. Fast upbeat music begins.]

Sonny: One of the things we think about when we design something, we want it to be of value. We want it to show that it's, "Hey, it's a good deal."

Tara: We want our excellent products to get noticed when they're on the shelves.

Amy: Sometimes the inspiration just comes from tasting the product itself.

Kailen: And I put my dog Oakley on the box and it's been a really big hit and everyone loves it.

Tara: Oakley's really cute.

Alicia: There are rules about jelly versus a jam or a preserve.

Matt: You would never want to be tripped up by that.

Alicia: (laughs)

[Music ends.]

Tara: Are you ready?

Matt: Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

[Theme music begins and two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, director of words and phrases and clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the marketing product guy.

Tara: In the words of Apicius, 1st century Roman foodie, "We eat first with our eyes."

Matt: Now that's true whether it's food you're serving at home or what you get to order in a restaurant. For Trader Joe's, the presentation of the food and the drink that we offer in our stores, well, that appeal really starts with the package or the label.

Tara: So one of our values is that Trader Joe's is a product driven company. So naturally we want our excellent products to get noticed when they're on the shelves. Our design team starts with a mandate to make it easy to read and understand. And they go way above and beyond.

[Music ends.]

Tara: They make our product designs fun.

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: We wanna give our customers information to help them in their decision making, in their shopping. And we want that shopping to be adventurous, to be friendly and fun. It absolutely applies to our product designs and the work to make those packages look great.

Tara: With us to talk about this whole process here in the mothership in Boston are some incredibly talented Trader Joe's crew members. I'll let you introduce yourselves.

Devon: I'm Devon and I have been designing with Trader Joe's for five years.

Amy: I'm Amy. I'm a packaging designer.

Kailen: Hi, everyone. I'm Kailen.

Jack: Hi, I'm Jack. I'm the art director at Trader Joe's and I've been here just over 19 years.

Tara: Wow! That's a lot of packages, Jack.

Matt: So one of the things about the look of Trader Joe's is that it's all over the place. It's not like a lot of other in-house or own brands or private labels where every single product looks exactly alike. Each of our products has its own unique visual identity.

Tara: How does a project begin? I mean, somebody says, "Hey, here's a new product and here's why we think our customers will like it?"

Matt: Devon?

Devon: So initially we receive a packet of information that's been compiled by the category manager and the nutritionist. And this packet of information has basically everything

that needs to be included on the package that we're designing. The amount of space that we have and the shape and size of the physical package that we'll be designing. So hopefully we can taste it and then our inspiration begins.

Matt: It's effectively a blank slate.

Devon: Yes.

Matt: How often do you land on an idea sooner than later? Is it pretty quick or does it take a bunch of brainstorming type of list making to come up with something that makes sense?
Amy?

Amy: I think the next step after that is searching for inspiration and we do that in a lot of different ways. And for me, I go right to my sketchbook and inspiration can come from all over the place like your own life, day to day what you're seeing. And then sometimes the inspiration just comes from tasting the product itself. That's enough inspiration. And for other projects, you're sitting there really running through your brain for a couple of days, trying to really come up with exactly what you want to do. So you never know.

Tara: Think back. What was maybe the toughest product you ever had to design a label or a package for?

Jack: The supplement category.

Matt: So there are regulatory rules, like, things have to be a certain height, like letters have to be so tall?

Jack: That's correct.

Matt: How do you balance that?

Jack: For me, my process, once I have everything in front of me, I take all that information...now that I've applied all the regulations to the fonts and the sizes, where can I add a little bit of creativity to make it a Trader Joe's label?

Matt: Being creative and having some fun, someone might use their own pet on a product.

Crew: (laughs)

Matt: To sort of have some fun with that. I mean, Kailen, what do you know about that kind of stuff?

Kailen: I did the Chew-Cuterie Dog Treats this year and I put my dog Oakley on the box and it's been a really big hit and everyone loves it.

Tara: Aww!

Matt: Was Oakley okay? Did Oakley say you didn't get my good sign or?

Kailen: (laughs) I went through a lot of pictures of Oakley to find the best one so I think he was happy with it.

Matt: So with all this talk about artistic process and the results that wind up on store shelves, I feel like we should have a little bit of a private view, a little gallery showing here. Maybe a little wine, a little cheese.

Tara: Oh we should. Yeah. But until we can do that, we've put together a little video showing a possible way that Trader Joe's product package artwork comes together. You can find it on our YouTube Channel, which is [youtube.com/traderjoes](https://www.youtube.com/traderjoes). And on the day that this podcast premieres, you'll also find it in our Instagram feed.

Matt: Any favorite projects that you've worked on or a favorite product, either because you love the product or because you love the design in the store?

Devon: I like to really include humor in my packaging as much as I can and when it's appropriate. So one of my favorite items that I designed was probably the Instant Cold Brew Coffee in a jar. The way you order your coffee is kind of like a personality trait, right? So if you read it, it kind of reads like you're having a conversation and there's a little order sheet on the side that says, "How do you take your coffee?" And I just thought that was so fun and I hope the customers also thought it was fun.

Matt: And Amy, what do you think?

Amy: So the Advent Calendars are really fun for me. Last year, I did the sending Christmas cards and drew the little gingerbread sitting at his table, writing Christmas cards. And it's fun because you can add so many elements that make it fun for...if the kid's looking at the Advent Calendar and they can find just little things throughout the scene that I took the time...the robot in the window, isn't just random. I drew him in there so the kids would be excited by a robot at the toy store. I just love being able to illustrate like that for the customer.

Matt: So do you sort of shop ideas back and forth like that?

Devon: We do.

Matt: I like that it is a piece of work process with an audience in mind. Our customers, that's important because we want to make sure that they're along for the ride too.

Devon: And we're all customers. So, we all have been in our store countless times and so it's great. And we'll even take a walk down to the store, down the street and look at the section and see what it looks like and where our product will fit in line. And so just to have that camaraderie and help from each other is great.

Tara: Devon, Amy, Kailen, Jack. Thank you.

Matt: We love the work that you're doing. Keep up the great stuff and we'll talk soon.

Crew: Thanks so much. Thank you, so much fun. That was fun.

[Music ends.]

Matt: When customers pick up a package in a Trader Joe's store, a specific product,

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Matt: ...you know, they'll see a lot of information. They might even look at that nutrition facts panel, but they might not understand everything that goes into getting all of those points of information accurately conveyed on that package. So I'd like to take a moment to talk about all the work that goes into nutritional labeling.

Alicia: Hi, my name is Alicia and I'm a nutrition specialist with Trader Joe's.

Tara: Alicia, thanks for joining us. You have a pretty complex job.

Alicia: I work with our private label products and ensuring that those products meet our brand promises as well as working on the labeling for those products to make sure that the content on the label is accurate, is helpful to the customers, and is compliant with regulations.

Tara: Alicia, what's an example of a brand promise?

Alicia: We don't allow artificial colors, we don't allow artificial flavors, meaning you won't see a product on our shelf that's artificially flavored key lime pie. We don't allow bleached flour, for example. Also we have, it's called a non RBST policy for dairy ingredients.

Matt: I love a good acronym. You wanna break that one down for us?

Alicia: Of course. RBST stands for recombinant bovine somatotropin hormone. So really what that means is just making sure that there's no added hormones in the cows, in the milk, in our dairy items.

Matt: That's a lot.

Alicia: Mmm-hmm.

Matt: And that's just for dairy.

Alicia: Correct. So part of what I do is make sure everything is buttoned up. For example, I'm working on a product right now, it's a granola with a yogurt flavored drizzle on it. And we need to know all the ingredients that are in the granola pieces, as well as all the ingredients that are in that yogurt flavored drizzle.

Tara: So I take it you can't just call it a yogurt drizzle.

Alicia: Yogurt actually has a standard of identity which maybe a regulatory jargon alert (laughs)?

Matt: You wanna do that for us? Would you like to give us a regulatory jargon alert? I can't wait!

Alicia: I would.

[Regulatory Jargon Alert - News Flash Sound]

Alicia: Regulatory jargon alert...

Matt: So you wanna break it down for us. Standard of identity...what does that mean?

Alicia: There are certain types of products that are defined in federal regulations and really that's meant to protect the customer. Like yogurt is defined. It has to have certain components in it. So in this case, we're talking about frosting that contains components of yogurt, but is not truly yogurt. Other examples would be cheeses. If we create a mozzarella cheese or if our vendors create a mozzarella cheese and we think, "Wow, this tastes just like a cheddar cheese." You're required to label it, it's a mozzarella cheese. It has a certain definition.

Matt: All right, now you have to choose, you have to pick, what is your favorite standard of identity entry in the regulatory federal code?

Alicia: I believe there is one called frozen cherry pie.

Matt: So I'm assuming it has to have cherries?

Alicia: Yes.

Matt: So there is somewhere in all the federal documents that exist rules about frozen cherry pie.

Alicia: Yes.

Tara: Whew. That's a relief.

Matt: Thank goodness.

Alicia: There are rules about jelly versus a jam or a preserve.

Matt: Cause you would never want to be tripped up by that.

Alicia: (laughs)

Matt: Like someone tries to, you know, jelly...it's like, wait a minute, "I asked for jam."

Alicia: Mm-hmm.

[Slight transition to new topic.]

Matt: Your work for us is sort of under this heading of nutrition, but I feel like you and the team, you're covering a lot of other things. You really work on what a package communicates.

Alicia: Sure. When a customer is shopping our store, they walk down the aisle. They have to notice the package and then we need the product name and the prominent information on the label to be accurate to the product so that a customer can quickly read the name and be like, "Oh, this is interesting to me. Let me pick this up, let me read more, put it in my cart." A lot of what I do is very technical. Looking at all the ingredients and analyzing the nutrition information, the allergen information. Design takes that content and makes it beautiful.

Matt: What's your favorite part of working on a product's packaging?

Alicia: With Trader Joe's we have so many innovative items. We have so many products that aren't sold in other places. We work really hard on something and then we can eat it and share it with our friends and family.

Matt: I love that. Any advice on, if you're shopping for groceries, what's the best approach to figure out what these labels mean or the stories that they're telling?

Alicia: The first thing to notice is the serving size. Especially if you're comparing different products in the store. One public service announcement (laughs) I can make is that Trader Joe's does not determine the serving size. No brand or other retailer determines the serving size.

Matt: Who does?

Alicia: Our federal government.

Matt: Oh man. Okay, so they're the ones who say like, you know, "A quarter of a burrito is a serving size?"

Alicia: Yes. Luckily a burrito serving size is slightly larger than that (laughs). All serving sizes are based off of federal mandated serving sizes.

Matt: Questions related to this come up all the time where it's like, we might make a product that is a little tiny ice cream cone, but the serving is like more than one little tiny ice cream cone.

Alicia: Mm-hmm. And sometimes you can see, we call them dual column serving sizes. So you'll see a nutrition facts panel that actually has two columns, a per serving, and then a per container, which gives you the nutrition information for a serving size or if you eat the entire contents and that is a newer regulation.

Matt: I thought people were watching me and they're like, "Matt always eats the whole tub of peanut butter cups. We better just do 'em a solid and make it easy."

Alicia: Mm-hmm (chuckles).

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: ...math-wise.

Alicia: Right? So we'll have per serving, per container, and Matt serving size (laughs).

Matt: That would be helpful. It would just be everything.

Alicia: Mm-hmm.

Tara: (chuckles)

Matt: It would be like 'the' pizza.

Alicia: Exactly.

Matt: 'The' ice cream...all of it.

Alicia: Mm-hmm.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: In your work Alicia, you get to cover lots of different kinds of products in all different categories.

Tara: Can you think of a product you've recently worked on that you're excited to finally be able to buy in stores?

Alicia: Cheeseburger Burrito.

Tara: That's one of my favorite new products.

Alicia: It's exactly what you want it to be.

Matt: Well, I'm gonna go on record. I love burritos.

Alicia: Mm-hmm

Matt: And I've been known to love cheeseburgers.

Alicia: (laughs)

Matt: I agree it is a great product. It's really fun.

Tara: Alicia, I'm glad we could catch up and talk about all this labeling stuff. What you do is important.

Alicia: Thank you for having me.

[Music ends.]

Matt: We'll talk to you soon.

[Transition. Light music begins.]

Tara: Matt, I often wonder about how packaging and design has changed at Trader Joe's through the years.

Matt: To get into that, let's go back to the Southern California mothership and let's talk with Sonny.

Tara: How long have you been with Trader Joe's, Sonny?

Sonny: I just found out today, 35 years in June.

Tara: (chuckles)

Sonny: I thought it was, it was going to be 34, not 35. Really, 35?

Matt: I'm pretty sure it's 35.

Sonny: Okay. I had my numbers wrong. Just like my age, I keep forgetting how old I am.

Tara: And just for reference, Sonny's a pretty young guy.

Sonny: I started actually in accounting as a file clerk.

Matt: Like all great designers.

Sonny: Yeah. And we had 27 stores I think at the time. I got hired on to do filing and invoice tracking, that kind of stuff. And I did, what was that thing called? Microfilm recording.

Tara: Oh.

Sonny: I was doing that for maybe a year or so. And then the vice president of marketing at the time, I don't know how she knew that I was going to school for art, and she interviewed me and asked me if I would like to help or lay out the flyer. And then I kind of mentioned to her, "You know, we're already laying out stuff on the computer. How about we just start laying out our labels and packaging?" And that was kind of the Genesis of it.

Matt: So from microfiche to literal, cutting and pasting to now. You think about everything now is digital. You probably had to wait for a courier to bring back from the printer.

Sonny: That's right. And then we faxed a lot of things back saying, "Oh, it's supposed to be this PMS color, not that color."

Matt: I can't think of a better communication tool for visual information than a fax machine.

Tara: And that was super high tech then.

Sonny: Yeah. Those were the old days.

Tara: Do you recall when Trader Joe's went from just doing little labels that, you know, had some type to doing like full on package design? Do you remember when that was?

Sonny: No, but I think it was driven by the idea of having photography on a lot of our frozen products. Cuz a lot of 'em before were just stickered with labels and you'd see the raw uncooked product kind of in a tray and a sleeve and it would have a label on it and it didn't look very appetizing so we started doing photography. And we noticed the bump in sales when we showed a product cooked and presented nicely. So that's kind of how it started.

Tara: When a product comes to you...

Sonny: Mm-hmm.

Tara: ...how do you determine what that design's gonna look like?

Sonny: It's like an interview process. We call it a creative brief. We talk to the product developer, ask them what are the attributes of the product? What makes it unique? Where does it come from? Did they travel to a place to source it? Or was that the inspiration? So it was really the story behind the product. And then we start thinking about what type of customer would buy it? And then also what's the price point? Can we use special printing?

Matt: Because all of those could, I guess, then add cost. We really work hard to not have that happen.

Sonny: You really push your creativity to do things where you could still come up with something really cool and unique with a lower budget.

Tara: You're also working quickly. The goal of what you and your team are doing is to get something on shelves, right?

Sonny: If I see a project in my inbox, sitting there and it's a really good product, I'm like, I really want to have a customer try it and be eating it and experiencing it instead of it sitting there in my inbox.

Matt: There are a lot of very time sensitive projects that come in where there's effectively no wiggle room, right?

Sonny: Come up with something cool right now.

Matt: Exactly. Yeah.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: You're just like, pull it out of the air.

Sonny: I need it tomorrow.

Matt: It's that product driven part of our business where having that thing, like you were saying, that product for customers to taste and hopefully love, that's what drives all the decision making and all the work that comes with it. Not whether or not, you know, someone was able to go to the top of a mountain to get creative inspiration.

Tara: I always go back to something that happened pretty soon after I started working at Trader Joe's, which was when we introduced Mandarin Orange Chicken and it was on the front page of the Fearless Flyer and it hadn't been introduced in stores yet. We were launching it and like a couple weeks before the flyer was to land in stores, but had already been printed (or was in the process of being printed), we found out that we didn't have the bags for the Mandarin Orange Chicken. Do you remember this?

Sonny: Yeah and we had to make temporary labels.

Tara: Yeah. You just jumped into action and took the artwork and converted it from this beautiful bag to a label that could be stuck on a clear plastic bag.

Sonny: That's kind of how we do things at Trader Joe's, right? It's like, we've got something we need to take action on right away and it's urgent and you know, again, it's customers not gonna be able to experience it if we don't get it out there. So we get it out there and get it done.

Tara: Yeah. That was like the very definition of nimble.

Sonny: There's always a way. I feel like we always find a way to get it done.

Matt: I think that's it. Do we need anything else?

Tara: We're good.

Sonny: All right.

Tara: Thanks, Sonny.

Sonny: Thanks guys.

[Closing theme music begins.]

Tara: This episode has really opened my eyes, Matt.

Matt: Yes, there is so much to see on a Trader Joe's product.

Tara: Next time you pick up a bottle of Magnifisauce or a bag of plantain chips or a box of our classic Joe-Joe's cookies, you might find yourself smiling. These are really fun creative designs.

Matt: I'm smiling now just thinking about them.

Tara: No, you're not (laughs).

Matt: Can you feel how smiley I am? This hurts.

Tara: (laughs) I think we need a different transition line for you (laughs).

Matt: Okay, I'll try it again.

Tara: If this podcast gave you a smile, please leave us a review. And be sure to hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: (chuckles under his breath)