



CEREAL BOX STORYTELLING

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, I came across an interesting study that examined how the visual design of a cereal box influences children's perceptions and eating habits. In this study, researchers placed the same cereal in two different boxes—one featuring a penguin character and the other without. Children were then asked to rate the taste of the cereal. Interestingly, the cereal from the penguin box received higher scores compared to the one without it. Same cereal, different boxes, different scores.



Cereal boxes used in the study. Mathew A. Lapierre et al., 2011

This study is an excellent example of the importance of visual storytelling. It also highlights the challenges we face as designers when the space available is quite limited. There is so much you can communicate on a small carton platform. On one hand, you have the product, its nutritional value, taste, health aspects, and branding; on the other hand, a limited carton space requires you to allocate significant room for a penguin.

Cereal boxes, often seen as simple containers, are sophisticated vehicles that convey narratives through color psychology, character design, typographic hierarchy, and behavioral framing. Here, I aim to analyze the essence of cereal box storytelling. I aim to assess how this type of storytelling incorporates the principles of emotional design and its impact on behavioral economics and other outcomes. Some of the dilemmas and challenges discussed here may also apply to other forms of storytelling in which content and data contend with platform limitations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CEREAL BOX STORYTELLING

Cereal boxes function as highly strategic vehicles of visual storytelling. Their designs feature distinctive qualities that set them apart from other vehicles like web platforms or large advertising posters.

What makes cereal box storytelling unique?

Limited defined structure

The traditional cereal box is a folding carton with an inner bag. Usually measuring 12 inches high by 8 inches wide, though this may vary slightly. Unlike the expansive digital spaces on screens, this physical form offers a confined, bordered area that tells a story within clear boundaries.

The constrained design of a cereal box: limited size, shape, and display orientation, serves as a powerful catalyst for visual storytelling. This forces designers to communicate meaning with precision, hierarchy, and creativity. The constraints promote narrative efficiency by urging them to condense brand stories into instantly recognizable symbols, character poses, or visual metaphors that can be understood at a distance in a fraction of a second. Additionally, the box's four sides establish a sequential storytelling structure: the front for attention and identity, the sides for functional information, and the back for extended narrative engagement—mirroring the rhythm of a micro-narrative.



Cereal box . Image created by AI

Within this fixed rectangular canvas, every element must be intentional: Imagery is distilled to its most iconic form, typography is strategically scaled to guide rapid scanning, and color palettes are optimized to signal category, flavor, and emotional tone.

Researchers Hill and Tiley from Manchester Metropolitan University highlight that the challenge is not only to deliver brand identity to attract a target market but also to allocate space for nutritional information and promotional offers. Conveying a message or a complete story within a limited, structured format requires careful strategy and design.

Cereal box strong colors

Color is one of the most influential storytelling tools on cereal boxes. It can shape consumer expectations, emotional reactions, and perceptions of the product even before reading any text. Within a limited visual space, color serves as an effective narrative device.

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85% of shoppers say that it is color that determines their purchase of a product.

thespeedypack.com

”

Warm colors like reds, oranges, and yellows typically convey energy, playfulness, or sweetness, making them particularly attractive for children’s cereals. Their stories revolve around excitement and fun. Conversely, cooler tones such as greens, blues, and earth tones are frequently used to construct narratives of health, naturalness, or calmness, aligning with adult-oriented or “better for you” cereals.



Fitness Cereal. Image by Nestle.com

Color also reinforces brand identity and character-driven storytelling. For example, mascots are often shown in highly saturated palettes to convey energy. At the same time, background gradients and contrasts guide the eye through a narrative hierarchy that highlights key messages like flavor cues or nutritional claims. Color schemes help position the product within genre norms: chocolate cereals use deep browns to suggest richness, while fruit-flavored cereals employ multicolored palettes to indicate variety and fun. Additionally, high-fiber cereals often use muted, rustic tones to communicate wholesomeness. In this way, color is more than just decoration; it's a storytelling tool that conveys emotional tone, product positioning, and brand promise within the brief decision-making moment on a retail shelf.

Here is a great example of effective color use. The SURREAL Cereal series features different colored boxes for each flavor – blue for chocolate, gold for honey, and red for cinnamon. Our eyes are naturally attracted to colors first, followed by the flavor text.



Surreal Cereal. Image by pentawards.com

Characters and mascots

Characters and mascots are among the most impactful storytelling tools on cereal boxes. They serve as instantly recognizable anchors that humanize the brand and foster emotional connections across different products and generations. They act as visual storytellers: their expressions, postures, and interactions with the cereal convey personality traits—like playfulness, trustworthiness, athleticism, or mischief—that influence consumer perceptions and emotional responses.



Kellogg's cereal mascots. Image by Thefastpackaging.com

For children's cereals, mascots often symbolize adventure or fun, using exaggerated gestures, lively movements, and direct eye contact. This strategy creates excitement and encourages imaginative engagement. On the other hand, characters for adult or health-focused cereals are usually more understated or symbolic, highlighting themes of tradition, nature, or a healthy lifestyle.

A public opinion survey by Harris et al, indicates that 50 % of parents believe that cartoon characters on food packages have a 'strong impact' on children's eating habits. This unique characteristic differentiated cereal box storytelling from other platforms.

Mascots act as vehicles for ongoing storytelling, expanding their narratives beyond the main label into commercials, digital media, and back-of-box content, thus building a unified brand universe. Their presence ensures consistency across different product variants, boosting brand recall and loyalty. Moreover, the interactions between mascots and cereals—such as reaching for a bowl, showcasing ingredients, or engaging in playful chases—imply stories about flavor, experience, or lifestyle without words. These techniques transform cereal boxes from mere packaging into character-driven storytelling platforms, enhancing brand identity, consumer engagement, and emotional connection at the point of sale.



Image created by AI

Typography and hierarchy

This element on cereal boxes operates as a core storytelling device, shaping how consumers interpret brand personality, product intent, and emotional tone before they even process the wording itself. Because cereal packaging must communicate quickly in a competitive retail environment, typographic choices serve as narrative cues that encode meaning through style, scale, and spatial arrangement.

Bold, playful, rounded typefaces—common in children’s cereals—convey fun, energy, and approachability, reinforcing stories of excitement, adventure, or sweetness. In contrast, serif or clean sans-serif fonts used in health-oriented cereals communicate credibility, simplicity, and nutritional integrity, supporting narratives of wellness and trust.

Hierarchy in typography also influences storytelling: large product names serve as focal points, establishing the cereal’s identity, while secondary text like flavor descriptions or health claims use different weights or colors to guide viewers through information. Kinetic effects—such as curved baselines, angled letters, or shadows—add motion and dynamism, often complementing mascots or action-oriented images to heighten drama. Even whitespace and alignment contribute to the narrative, indicating whether the product appears lively and chaotic or refined and organized.

Overall, cereal box typography is more than just labeling; it constructs a narrative structure that embodies brand values, attracts target audiences, and shapes the consumer’s experience of the product story within seconds.



Froot Loops Logo and typography. image by worldbranddesign.com

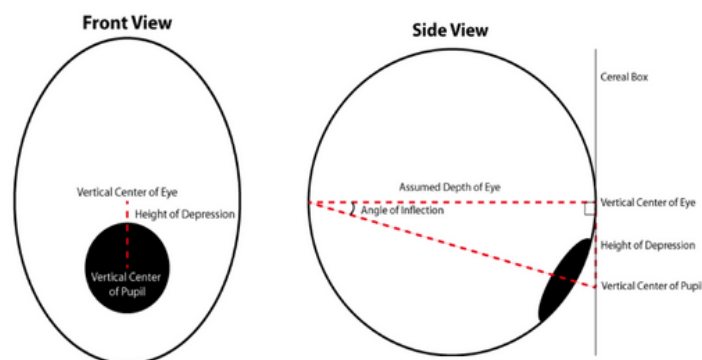
For example, Kellogg’s Froot Loops uses the syllable "O" in its typography to represent the cereal rings. This design choice appeals to its primary audience—children—by creating a colorful and engaging look. The visual storytelling effectively communicates the fruity flavor through its playful typography.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL DESIGN IN CEREAL BOXES STORYTELLING

Emotional design plays a key role in shaping how consumers perceive the product, influencing their purchasing decisions at the point of sale and building long-term brand loyalty. By skillfully applying color psychology, typography, imagery, and character design, cereal packaging evokes emotional responses that guide consumers' understanding and interpretation of the product.

How do sugary cereals catch the attention of kids in the grocery store aisle?

According to a study by Aner Tal et al, brand mascots like Captain Crunch and the Trix rabbit are designed to make eye contact with the target audience. In this study, they evaluated the placement of cereal boxes in ten grocery stores in New York and Connecticut. Unsurprisingly, children's cereals were placed on the bottom two shelves, while adult cereals were higher. Researchers also found that the cartoon characters' stares on children's cereal boxes were fixed downward at an average angle of nearly 10 degrees. On adult cereals, the gazes were nearly straight ahead.



Angle of inflection of Cereal characters' gaze. Image by Aner Tal et al, 2014

Preliminary tests show that the method works well. When adults were shown one of two Trix boxes—one with the rabbit looking straight ahead and one with him looking down—surveyed adults reported higher brand trust and loyalty for the box with the rabbit looking straight.



Trix cereal boxes were used in the study. Image by Aner Tal et al, 2014

This study shows how spokes-characters making eye contact can serve as a valuable advertising tool to attract both adults and children. Making eye contact with the spokes-character on the cereal box encourages positive interpersonal feelings, which may transfer to the cereal itself.

A child shopping with their parents and making eye contact with Tony the Tiger may start to feel positive emotions and a connection with the character, which may influence the child's feelings toward the cereal. Eye contact doesn't just have the potential to increase cereal sales but can also build more loyal customers by fostering positive feelings, trust, and a sense of connection.

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| *The corner stone of emotional design is the idea that if you can elicit strong emotions in your users – you can use those emotions to either create loyalty or to drive a customer to take action.*
| ”

Interaction Design Foundation

Cereal brands often hold a significant place in early childhood routines, becoming linked with anticipation, comfort, family traditions, and joyful moments. Their mascots and visual identities trigger fond personal memories, making them perfect for nostalgic self-expression. For instance, friends or family members often dress up as cereal mascots during activities. Wearing these symbols enables individuals to express valued aspects of their past, turning the brand into a personal story artifact.



Cereal boxes mascot costumes. Image by Pinterest.com

Plutchik's wheel of emotions shows that cereal boxes do more than simply appear attractive; they intentionally trigger emotions that capture attention, influence taste perceptions, and boost brand recognition. Their packaging approaches are closely tied to Plutchik's core emotions.

For example, joy is one of the main emotions and is most often highlighted on cereal packaging. Bright colors, playful mascots, and dynamic layouts are carefully crafted to evoke happiness, especially in children's cereals. Brands use friendly mascots, direct eye contact, and reassuring taglines to build trust. Iconic characters like Tony the Tiger or the heart imagery on Cheerios communicate feelings of safety, consistency, and reliability, aligning with Plutchik's concepts of "trust" and "acceptance."

Additionally, cereal boxes create anticipation through action poses, “hidden games,” or “collectible surprises” shown on the front. These emotional cues spark curiosity and encourage buying by promising an experience beyond just nutrition. Lastly, family-oriented images, heart shapes, and warm color schemes are used to evoke affection—especially in cereals marketed as wholesome, comforting, or connected to family traditions

In a 2020 study by Contreras-Manzano et al., conducted in Mexico, researchers examined the effect of a cartoon character on cereal packaging on adults' perceptions of the product. In this study, 3755 adult participants took part. Initially, 1789 participants were assigned to the “cartoon” condition, where they viewed a breakfast cereal box featuring a Minion character on the front. The remaining 1966 participants viewed the same cereal box but without any character on the packaging (control condition). Participants were asked: "Is this a good cereal to buy for children?" with response options: Yes, No, or Don't know.



Cereal boxes were used in the study. Image by Contreras-Manzano et al., 2020

	Control Box		Cartoon Character Box	
	n (%)	RRR	n (%)	RRR (95%CI)
Overall sample (n = 3755)	1966 (100)		1789 (100)	
Good	1077 (54.8)	1.00	814 (45.5)	1.00
Not good	569 (28.9)	1.00	704 (39.4)	1.67 (1.45, 1.94)
Don't know	320 (16.3)	1.00	271 (15.1)	1.15 (0.95, 1.39)
Parents (n = 1865)	966 (100)		899 (100)	
Good	543 (56.2)	1.00	450 (50.1)	1.00
Not good	272 (28.2)	1.00	314 (34.9)	1.39 (1.13, 1.72)
Don't know	151 (16.6)	1.00	135 (15.0)	1.08 (0.83, 1.42)
Non-parents (n = 1890)	1000 (100)		890 (100)	
Good	534 (53.4)	1.00	364 (40.9)	1.00
Not good	297 (29.7)	1.00	390 (43.8)	2.01 (1.63, 2.47)
Don't know	169 (16.9)	1.00	136 (15.3)	1.25 (0.95, 1.64)

Study results. Image by Contreras-Manzano et al., 2020

The study demonstrates that the presence of a cartoon character on a cereal box significantly alters adults' perceptions of the product's suitability for children. Contrary to the widespread assumption that cartoon characters universally enhance appeal, the experiment showed that adults were more likely to judge a cereal as "not good to buy for children" when a cartoon character appeared on the front of the package compared to when no character was displayed. Specifically, exposure to the Minion character increased the likelihood of perceiving the cereal negatively by 67% relative to the condition. Importantly, the emotional design element—the cartoon character—did not function as a positive persuasion cue for adults in this context. Instead, it triggered skepticism, likely because adults associate cartoon imagery with marketing tactics aimed at children and with products of lower nutritional quality.

This study concludes that cartoon characters on cereal boxes, as an emotional design strategy, backfire among adults, prompting perceptions of lower product quality and reduced healthfulness.

In conclusion, emotional storytelling elements must be used carefully on cereal boxes because they significantly affect how the product's story is conveyed. This effect can differ depending on the target audience, so it's essential to consider not only the design but also which emotions are triggered in different age groups.

BEHAVIORAL DESIGN ON CEREAL BOXES

Another key aspect of cereal box storytelling is its impact on behavioral economics. Anchoring and framing—fundamental concepts in behavioral economics and cognitive psychology—play a vital role in how consumers interpret the messages on cereal packaging. In the quick-paced supermarket environment, where attention is fleeting and cognitive resources are limited, cereal boxes rely on concepts to shape perception, guide interpretation, and influence purchasing choices.

The anchoring effect, first described by Tversky and Kahneman in 1974, is a cognitive bias in which people rely heavily on the first piece of information—called the “anchor”—when making judgments. In cereal-pack visual storytelling, anchors have both numerical and symbolic roles, shaping initial perceptions that greatly influence later opinions.

For example, cereal boxes often feature nutritional anchors like “10g Protein,” “Made with Whole Grain,” or “20% Daily Fiber.” Health-related anchors include badges such as “Heart Healthy,” icons like “Low Sugar,” and labels such as “Gluten-Free.” Also, specific value anchors are frequently used, including “Family Size,” “Limited Edition,” or “Only 100 Calories.”



Examples cereal boxes. Image by Amazon.com and mrbreakfast.com

Framing, conceptualized initially by Kahneman and Tversky (1981), refers to the way information is presented—such as emphasizing gains versus losses, health versus indulgence, or enjoyment versus nutrition—that systematically shapes consumer decisions.

On cereal packaging, different frames are used: health-framing features pastoral landscapes, natural colors such as green and beige, wooden textures, and wheat imagery; indulgence-framing is highlighted by dripping chocolate, splashes of milk, and vibrant colors, with highly saturated palettes. Childlike fantasy framing transports consumers to magical worlds, with sparkles, celestial symbols, and mythical creatures. Each frame tells a narrative promise—health, fun, adventure, or sweetness—those pre-structures consumer expectations.



Cereal boxes examples. Image by Amazon.com

Anchoring and framing mutually reinforce each other: anchors shape the narrative flow, while frames boost the credibility and appeal of anchors. Together, they form a dual-process persuasive system where anchors offer logical reasons and frames evoke emotional ties. This mental combination supports decision-making, enhances the product's perceived value, and links the cereal to wider cultural narratives around health, enjoyment, indulgence, or athleticism. Ultimately, anchoring and framing turn cereal boxes into tools of behavioral design, guiding consumer choices through a mix of numerical credibility, symbolic storytelling, and emotionally engaging visuals.

The main concern is how those concepts are applied in the cereal competitive industry.

A 2011 study by Harris et al. examines how parents interpret common front-of-package nutrition claims on children’s cereals. It also aims to assess their willingness to purchase products of below-average nutritional quality.

Using an online survey, the researchers showed 306 parents images of real cereal boxes with claims such as “supports immunity,” “whole grain,” “fiber,” “calcium & vitamin D,” and “organic”. All those cereals were high in sugar and low in other beneficial nutrients.



Cereal boxes examples. Image by foodpolitics.com

The study found that parents frequently misinterpreted these claims, assuming broader, often inaccurate health benefits that go well beyond the statements' actual meaning. For example, most parents believed that “calcium & vitamin D” meant the cereal would help their children “grow strong bones”. They interpreted the “immunity” claim as a promise that the cereal would “keep their child from getting sick” despite these products’ poor overall nutritional profiles. These misconceptions significantly increased parents’ willingness to purchase the cereals, showing that implied health messages—not just factual nutrient information—strongly influence consumer perceptions.

In this study, anchoring and framing help explain why parents misinterpret nutrition claims on children’s cereals and become more willing to buy nutritionally poor products. The claims on the front of the cereal boxes acted as anchors—the first and most salient pieces of information parents saw. Phrases like “supports immunity” or “good source of calcium and vitamin D” anchored parents’ evaluations, causing them to overestimate the cereal’s overall healthfulness even when the actual nutrition facts showed high sugar and low fiber. Rather than reassessing the full information, parents relied on the initial anchor to guide their judgment.

At the same time, the claims framed the cereals within a positive health narrative. By highlighting a single nutrient or benefit, the packaging framed the product as protective, strengthening, or healthy, leading parents to infer broader health benefits that were not supported by the cereal’s nutrient profile.

Overall, the integration of anchoring and framing within cereal box design shows how principles of behavioral economics systematically influence consumer interpretation and decision-making. By highlighting selective nutrient claims as prominent anchors and placing them within visually consistent framing strategies, cereal packaging creates persuasive narratives that boost perceived product healthiness regardless of actual nutritional quality. The findings of Harris et al. further support this, showing that parents heavily rely on these anchored and framed cues, often assuming broad health benefits that the cereal’s nutrient profile does not support.

IMPACT OF DESIGN ON SALES

Visual design can significantly influence cereal box sales. Extensive research in consumer psychology, marketing, and behavioral economics demonstrates that packaging is more than just a container; it acts as a persuasive tool at the point of sale, directly affecting purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay.

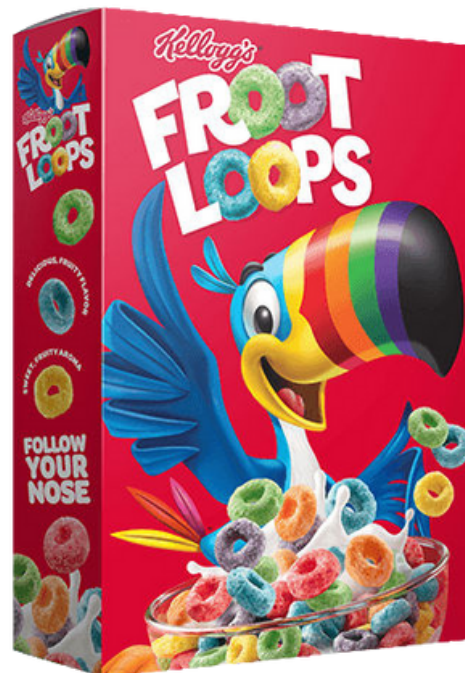
Since 1963, animated Toucan Sam has been the symbol of Fruit Loops worldwide. Over the years, with no change to the main image, this animated character became increasingly irrelevant to consumers. His realistic and human-like features no longer resonated in the digital age. The logo and branding appeared outdated and failed to convey the sense of adventure and fun associated with the cereal. As a result, the brand no longer established a meaningful connection with consumers.

Recently, Toucan Sam has received a notable redesign. Most visibly, two color bands now decorate his beak, with the pink band replaced by an orange one. The mascot's upper limbs, previously depicted as arms and hands, are now styled to resemble wings, which are more expressive and human-like than those of typical tropical birds. While the mascot remains the central figure, other elements have gained prominence. The Froot Loops logo has been enlarged, with the "Kellogg's" text slightly reduced. The cereal bowl image, along with the spilling loops, is now displayed more prominently for closer inspection. The brand also decided to remove the green box highlighting Vitamin C content and the absence of high-fructose corn syrup, and to simplify and relocate the "natural fruit flavors" call-out. It also added a claim to the center-left of the package, highlighting the "9 vitamins and minerals" in the cereal.

Before



After



Froot Loops branding and packaging update. Image by worldbranddesign.com

The back panel was redesigned to feature an interactive Froot Loops World, engaging children during mealtimes. This fully illustrated scene invites kids to explore with Sam. Additionally, four distinctive designs motivate children to collect all four boxes and combine them to build an exciting pop-up world.



Froot Loops branding and packaging update. Image by worldbranddesign.com

The redesign was evaluated through consumer testing across various performance metrics, such as purchase preference, “mental availability,” communication of product features, and “design-element resonance.”

The new design significantly outperformed the previous design, with consumers preferring it by 77% to 23%.

According to Designalytics, their consumer insights align with actual sales more than 90% of the time, providing strong commercial credibility to the results. As a result, the redesign serves as a real-world example of how visual storytelling and packaging choices can influence brand performance and potentially sales – not by changing the product itself, but by using packaging as a communication and persuasion tool.

CONCLUSION

Cereal box storytelling functions as a complex, multidimensional communication system that combines visual design, emotional cues, and principles of behavioral economics. All this aims to influence consumer perception and decision-making. The evidence reviewed here demonstrates that packaging is more than a protective or informational surface. It is a strategic storytelling medium that operates within a highly competitive retail environment. Through the intentional use of color psychology, typography, mascots, and spatial hierarchy, cereal boxes create symbolic narratives that guide attention, evoke emotion, and shape brand identity.

Emotional design—especially the use of characters, eye contact, and nostalgic associations—plays a key role in building trust, joy, and brand loyalty. However, its effectiveness varies substantially across age groups, as research indicates that cartoon characters can reduce perceived healthfulness among adults.

The studies discussed illustrate how selective health anchors and positive framing can mislead consumers into overestimating the nutritional value of sugary cereals. These examples highlight the persuasive power embedded in packaging design. These mechanisms demonstrate that visual storytelling influences not only emotional engagement but also judgment formation and behavior.

Real-world case studies provide empirical support for the commercial impact of effective packaging updates. The notable improvement in consumer preference following the redesign underscores the role of packaging in driving brand revitalization and market performance.

Overall, cereal box storytelling is a dynamic intersection of design, psychology, and marketing. Its power lies in its ability to compress meaning, emotion, and persuasion into a confined visual space, shaping consumer experiences within seconds. As brands innovate and platforms evolve, the art of cereal box storytelling will become more challenging, requiring expert design.

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