

Everything In Its Right Place

Stress-free product development for food & beverage, from the shelf to the empty package.

Calm Facts

Per package, from shelf to bin

Tools needed to open	None
Messages on the front	One
Tested on	Every likely hand
Reseals that fail	Zero
Recycling guesswork	None

Contains no cognitive micro-taxes.

The first in a series taking The Joy Dividend into practice. This one applies the Calm Advantage to food and beverage product development.

ON THE TITLE

Borrowed from Radiohead. Stress is the baseline. Calm is what you build against it.

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OPENING

It's 9:40 at night and you want three crackers.

The sleeve tears down the side instead of across the top. Half the crackers end up in the cabinet. The ones still in the box will be soft by Thursday. Nobody on the brand team will ever hear about this. It is still the product.

Food and beverage product development is very good at the moment of choice. It is mostly blind after it. The category is locked in an arms race on the front of the pack, protein grams against fiber against gut health against clean label, and almost none of that effort reaches the person standing at the counter trying to get the thing open.

The Joy Dividend is the compound interest of customer love, earned by consistently reducing stress and sparking joy. It starts with calm.

You cannot delight someone who is fighting the lid.



The product, as experienced at 9:40 p.m.

01

THE GOAL

The goal is a joy-based brand. The order matters.

The Joy–Stress Matrix has four quadrants, and the Joy Dividend accrues in only one of them: Joyful & Stress-Free. Getting there runs in a fixed sequence. First, remove noise. Then, layer delight. Finally, deepen with purpose.

STEP 1 · THIS PAPER
Remove noise

STEP 2
Layer delight

STEP 3
Deepen with purpose

Most brands skip the first step because it doesn't photograph. Delight gets a launch. Calm gets a line item. But delight layered onto friction doesn't register as delight. It registers as one more thing to deal with.

78%

of consumers who found a company easy to deal with said they'd likely buy more (22 industries)¹

That's why this series starts with the Calm Advantage, the lever whose promise is “stress-free by default”: make every interaction lighter than customers expect. It works by removing cognitive micro-taxes, the small, cumulative drains on attention that never show up in a single complaint and always show up in the repeat rate.

18%

of those who found it difficult said the same¹

Ease pays on its own. In a Qualtrics XM Institute study of 10,000 U.S. consumers across 22 industries, 78% of people who found a company easy to deal with said they were likely to buy more from it. Among those who found it difficult, 18% said the same.¹ That's stated intent, not tracked purchases, but the gap is hard to ignore.

02

THE CAST

Start with who. Then ask who else.

Every product brief names a target consumer. In food and beverage, that is usually the person who pays. It is often not the person who opens the package, and sometimes not the person who eats what's inside.

A parent buys yogurt tubes. A seven-year-old can't tear one open. A lunch aide ends up opening half the table's. The same parent buys a dinner kit, and a teenager ends up cooking it. Buyer, opener, preparer, eater: up to four people, four pairs of hands, and the product has to work for whichever one is holding it.

The opener deserves more design attention than most personas get. About 53 million U.S. adults have diagnosed arthritis, including nearly half of adults 65 and older.² When researchers in Australia handed the items from a standard hospital meal tray to 40 well older adults recruited from the community, almost 40% of those who tried could not open the cheese portion. Those who managed it took about 51 seconds on average.³

53M

U.S. adults with diagnosed arthritis, including 47% of those 65 and older²

51sec

average time older adults in one study took to open a cheese portion³

The buyer

Who chooses it, where, and with how much attention left.

The preparer

How much time, which equipment, and who's waiting.

The opener

Whose hands, how much strength, which tools within reach.

The eater

Who consumes it, where, and how many times.

Sometimes one person. Often three or four. Design for the hand that opens it, not the card that paid for it.

03

THE JOURNEY

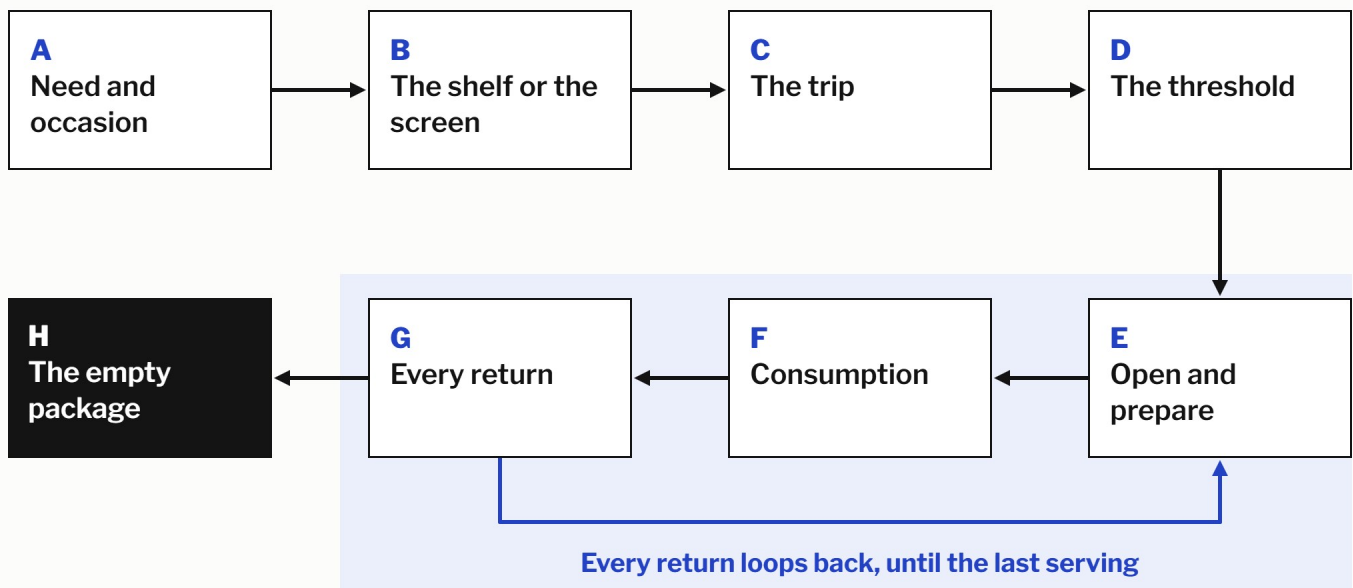
Consumption isn't a moment. It's a loop.

Most journey maps stop at the cart or the doorstep. In food and beverage, that is barely halfway.

Tony Ulwick's Outcome-Driven Innovation model separates the core functional job from the consumption chain jobs around it: acquisition, setup, maintenance, disposal.⁸ Both matter here. The journey starts before the shelf, with a need and an occasion, and the middle of it repeats. A jar of peanut butter gets opened twenty times. Every return is another chance for the lid to stick, the bag to fail, the chips to go stale.

So the map runs from the need to the empty package, and it loops in between.

EIGHT STAGES, FROM NEED TO EMPTY PACKAGE



03 · THE JOURNEY, STAGE BY STAGE

A

Need and occasion*What is the person trying to get done, and when?*

Every product is hired for a job, and the job comes with an occasion. Breakfast in the car at 7 a.m. and breakfast at the table on Sunday are different jobs, even when the food is identical. Ulwick calls this the core functional job.⁸ Packaging can't make a product calm if it doesn't fit the occasion.

CALM MOVES

Write the occasion into the brief: who, when, where, and in how many minutes.

Formulate for the job. Every extra claim is something someone has to decode.

Decide what the product will never ask of the person.

B

60%

of those who'd seen conflicting food information on social media say it makes them doubt their choices⁴

The shelf or the screen*Can they tell, at a glance, what this is, who it's for, and how much is inside?*

The shopper often arrives already doubting. In the 2023 IFIC Food & Health Survey, six in ten people who had seen conflicting food information on social media said it made them doubt their choices.⁴ A front of pack carrying six claims adds to the doubt it's trying to settle.

CALM MOVES

One primary message on the front; supporting claims on the back.

Allergens and dietary fit findable in one look.

Type sized and contrasted for the oldest likely reader.

Quantity and servings legible without turning the pack over.

03 · THE JOURNEY, STAGE BY STAGE**C****The trip***Where does it ship?*

A shelf pack and a doorstep pack are different products. One stands upright under store lights. The other rides a parcel network on its side through a hot truck. A lid that's fine on a shelf can leak in a box, and a seal strong enough to survive shipping can be too strong for the person at the door. Amazon built an entire program around “Frustration-Free Packaging.” The name tells you what the default was.

CALM MOVES

Test for every route the product actually travels.

Protect it in transit without turning protection into an opening problem.**D****The threshold***Where does it live?*

Not “home.” The pantry shelf, the fridge door, the freezer drawer, the desk, the gym bag, the car's cup holder. Each has its own shape, temperature, and neighbors. For a multi-serve product, this is also where every return starts.

CALM MOVES

Packs that stand, stack, and fit where the product actually lives.

Contents visible or easy to gauge, so nobody has to open it to find out how much is left.

Storage instructions on the part of the pack that's visible in storage.

03 · THE JOURNEY, STAGE BY STAGE · THE LOOP

E

24%

of older adults in the same study who tried couldn't open a fruit cup³

Open and prepare

Whose hands, what tools, and how many steps?

This is where the buyer, the opener, the preparer, and the eater stop being a slide and become a pair of hands. Preparation is product design too. Every extra pan, timer, and step is a cognitive micro-tax, and so is the cleanup nobody put on the box.

CALM MOVES

Tear points that tear where they say they will. No scissors, no knife, no teeth.

Opening tested across every likely hand, starting with the weakest.

Fewer steps and tools, and no guessing about time or temperature.

Cleanup counted as part of preparation.

F

Consumption

Does it deliver what the pack promised?

This is the moment the product exists for, and the one most journey maps skip. Calm here means no unpleasant surprises: the texture matches the photo, the portion matches the occasion, and the tenth one tastes like the first. It also means the eater doesn't have to manage the food while eating it.

CALM MOVES

Taste and texture that match the promise on the front.

Formats that suit where it's actually eaten: a desk, a car, a plate, a lap.

The same experience from one purchase to the next.

Portions that fit the occasion and the appetite.

03 · THE JOURNEY, STAGE BY STAGE · THE LOOP

G

84%

throw food away near
the package date at
least occasionally⁵

100,000

tonnes of UK
household food
waste a year that
WRAP estimates
could be avoided for
five produce items⁶

Every return, to the last serving

What happens the second, fifth, and twentieth time, and does it last?

The date label is a product feature that's usually written like a legal disclaimer. In a survey of 1,029 U.S. adults, 84% said they throw food away near the package date at least occasionally, and more than half either believed date labels are federally regulated or weren't sure.⁵ They aren't, except on infant formula, and USDA says the dates signal quality, not safety.⁹ The pack rarely says which.

Pack size decides how long something has to last. WRAP's 2022 research in the UK estimated that selling five fresh produce items loose, and dropping their Best Before dates, could prevent around 100,000 tonnes of household food waste a year, in part because people could buy the amount they needed.⁶ Produce isn't your product. The lesson travels.

CALM MOVES

Closures that actually reseal.

Portions people can judge without a scale.

Container geometry that lets a spoon reach the last third.

Date labels that say whether a date is about quality or safety, with storage and after-opening guidance next to it.

Sizes built around real households, including the one-person household.

03 · THE JOURNEY, STAGE BY STAGE

H

The empty package

What's the last thing the package asks of them?

The end of an experience carries outsized weight in how it's remembered. That's the Peak-End Rule. In food and beverage, the end is the bin. In The Recycling Partnership's 2022 research, 78% of Americans said they check the package to decide whether it's recyclable. Asked about a food pouch, 91% were wrong or unsure.⁷

CALM MOVES

Materials that are actually accepted where your buyer lives.

Disposal instructions that are specific, and placed where people look when the package is empty.

WRONG OR UNSURE: IS THIS RECYCLABLE?



Share of respondents who were wrong or unsure about each item's recyclability. The Recycling Partnership & OpinionWorks, 2022.⁷

The last feeling a lot of packaging leaves behind is doubt.

04
THE FOOD

Calm starts before
the package does.

Packaging gets a lot of attention in this paper because it's where a lot of friction hides. But the food makes promises of its own, and every one of them can add load or take it away.

SIX PRODUCT DECISIONS, THROUGH THE CALM ADVANTAGE

DECISION	THE STRESS	THE CALM MOVE
Formulation	Ingredients chosen to win a claim, then explained on the pack.	Formulate for the job and the occasion. Less to explain.
Dietary fit	Hunting for allergens and restrictions in the fine print.	Allergens and dietary fit stated where people look first.
Preparation	Extra pans, timers, guesswork, and cleanup nobody mentioned.	Fewer steps and tools; clear time and temperature.
Taste and texture	A product that doesn't match its photo or its promise.	Deliver what the front of pack says, every time.
Portion	Too much for one, too little for four.	Sizes that match real households and real occasions.
Consistency	The fifth purchase tastes different from the first.	Predictable across batches, seasons, and channels.



Preparation is product design too.

05

THE METHOD

Plot load, not touchpoints.

Product teams already have journey maps. What changes here is the y-axis. A standard map tracks touchpoints: where the brand meets the person. A Calm Advantage map tracks load: what the person has to figure out, remember, or work around at each step.

Same journey, different question. It surfaces what a touchpoint map can't, because most cognitive micro-taxes are levied where the brand isn't watching.

THE EASE METHOD, FROM THE JOY DIVIDEND, APPLIED TO A PACKAGE

E

Eliminate

Remove steps. No scissors, no second seal, no hunting for the tear notch.

A

Automate

Make the right choice the default. Pre-portioned, pre-measured, a closure that closes itself.

S

Simplify

One message on the front. A date label written for humans. Disposal with one answer.

E

Empower

Let people see what's left, control how much they use, and close it again.

A LOAD MAP · ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: A MULTI-SERVE SNACK BAG

STAGE	FIGURE OUT	REMEMBER	WORK AROUND
Shelf	Which claim matters	Which flavor the kids like	Small type, glare
First open	Where the tear starts	Where the scissors are	A torn side seam
Every return	Whether it's still fresh	To clip it shut	A zipper that won't zip
Empty package	Whether it's recyclable	The local rules	No clear answer

06

THE REVIEW

Eight questions for your next stage-gate review.

Stage-gate reviews ask whether a product works. These ask whether it works for a person.

-
- ☐ What job is it hired for, and on what occasion?
 -
 - ☐ Have we tested with the buyer, opener, preparer, and eater?
 -
 - ☐ Can someone tell what it is and who it's for at a glance?
 -
 - ☐ Does it ship, and does it arrive the way it left?
 -
 - ☐ Where will it actually live, and does it fit there?
 -
 - ☐ Can the weakest likely hand open it without a tool?
 -
 - ☐ Does the tenth serving taste like the first?
 -
 - ☐ When it's empty, does the pack say what to do with it?
-



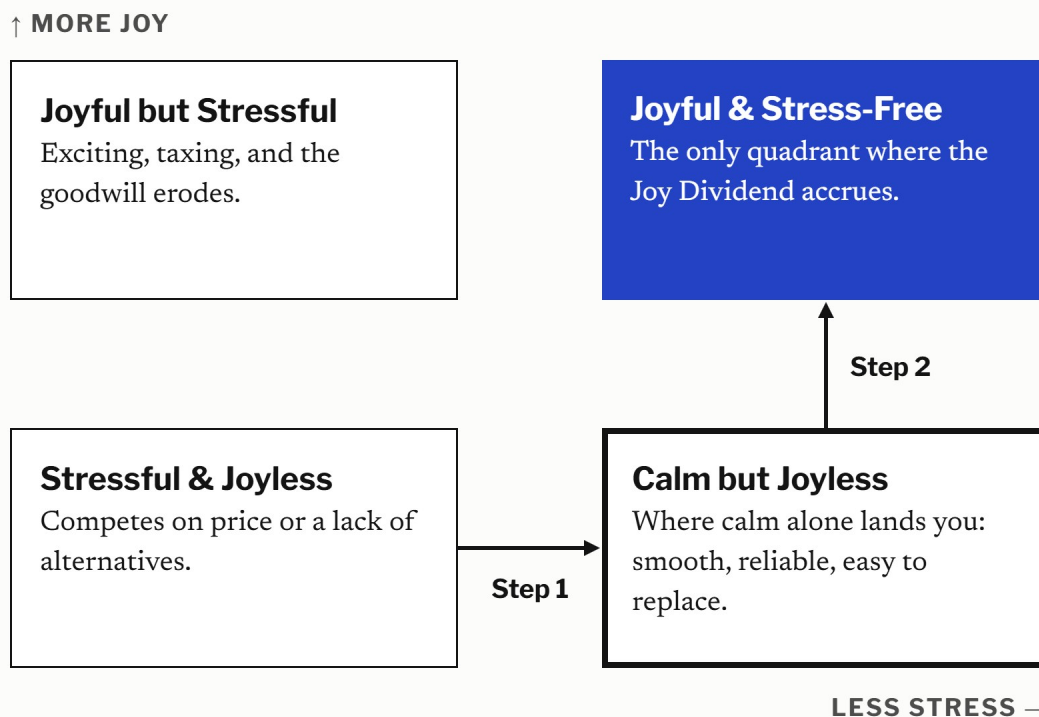
Run the list with someone who has never seen the product. Then run it again with someone over 70.

07

THE FLOOR

Calm earns the repeat purchase. It doesn't earn the love.

That's not nothing. A product that works effortlessly earns confidence and trust, and people come back out of habit. But Calm but Joyless is a real quadrant on the Joy–Stress Matrix, where commodities live: reliable, smooth, and swapped the moment something cheaper shows up.



The Joy–Stress Matrix. Step 1 removes noise. Step 2 layers delight.

The Joy Dividend accrues only in the top right. Once the lid opens easily and the bag reseals, there's finally room for the things people talk about: texture, shape, sound, the small surprise inside. That's the next paper in this series: Playful Design.

Everything in its right place is where the work starts. It isn't where the brand ends.

Sources

FRAMEWORK

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