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No Infringement Intended: What Brands Can Learn About Trade Dress From the YETI and RTIC Cooler Wars

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In the [previous installment](#) of the Cooler Wars, we explored how patents protect the functional aspects of a product and where those protections fall short. YETI, a well-established brand known for its premium outdoor products, initiated legal action against RTIC, a newer competitor, alleging in part that RTIC’s products too closely resembled YETI’s distinctive designs. One aspect of their dispute stemmed from YETI’s efforts to protect the unique visual identity it had cultivated in the highly competitive cooler market: their trade dress, which is our focus today.

While patents cover what a product does and how it works, trade dress protects how a product looks and feels. In competitive consumer markets, that distinction matters. Recent cases like Benefit and e.l.f. Cosmetics’ mascara showdown reinforced how courts evaluate these claims, including whether consumers are in fact confused, how products are packaged and sold, and if the alleged infringer actually intended to deceive. The court found no infringement on e.l.f.’s end, in part because its packaging prominently displayed its own branding, the products were sold in clearly separate channels, and beauty consumers were deemed savvy enough to tell the difference, despite some visual similarities.

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