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PACKAGING TECHNOLOGY

Progressive Packaging Benefits Everyone

By Bryan Salvage, Editorial Director

The "perfect package" offers value-added solutions for processors, retailers, and consumers.

Packaging is playing an increasingly important role in driving retail and deli meat sales. In addition to providing safety and ensuring product integrity, progressive packaging also entices consumers to buy one product over another thanks to eye-catching graphics and designs while at the same time supplying helpful consumer information.

Opportunities to enhance food safety plus increase retail and deli meat sales exist thanks to a wide variety of packaging technologies.

"There are significant opportunities to cross-pollinate proven technologies and packaging materials across the protein platform," said Steven Morris, Tyson Foods' director of corporate packaging design and research, in a past issue of *The NATIONAL PROVISIONER*. "Anti-microbial films, oxygen-scavenging laminates, CO₂ emitters, UV-light inhibitors, active packaging constructions – all will play a key role in Tyson Foods' packaging development for the future."

Packaging experts say consumer demand is driving the packaging evolution.

"Product safety is the issue first and foremost in the minds of today's consumers," says David Hugg, director of sales, Vector Packaging, Oak Brook, IL. "Consumers are also interested in extended shelf life once the product is brought home. Eye-catching graphics are also a factor affecting consumer purchasing decisions. And price is always an influence on buying decisions."

Research shows time-starved consumers are looking for convenient packaging, such as easy-opening recloseable features, easy to carry, easy to reheat, and easy to store, says Alan Roberts, vice president of processor sales, Robbie Manufacturing Inc., Lenexa, KS.

"Packaging also needs to meet health and safety regulations for freshness and be tamper-proof," he adds.

Consumers want a secure package that has retained its sealing integrity, and, therefore, the shelf life of its contents, says Howard White, managing director of Stanelco PLC, Southhampton, England, and president of U.S. operations. The company recently introduced *GREENSEAL*, which it calls a revolutionary new packaging application that uses Stanelco radio frequency (RF) technologies.

"The RF process creates a weld, not a seal," White says. "It can seal through contaminants and does not require polyethylene lamination. This means that trays and the skeletal waste are recyclable --- which saves tons of fossil-fuel plastics, reduces land waste, and reduces the tray cost by about twenty percent. In addition, the weld can be as little as 1 mm wide and still be much stronger than a regular heat seal, so this saves retailers valuable shelf space."

Consumers are looking for convenience in processed deli meat, says Jay Wilson, senior marketing director for fresh and processed meats, Cryovac/Sealed Air Corp., Duncan, SC. "This includes easy-open, recloseable, and reuseable [functions]. There is growth in those categories," Wilson says. "Product visibility is still important to consumers. They want to see the product. Assurance of a safe product, and the ability to look at a package and understand it has integrity, are all important."

Consumers generally want three features from packaging: convenience, integrity, and information, says Huston Keith, principal of Marietta, GA-based Keymark Associates.

"They want packaging that is easy to open and reclose, and easy to store," he adds. "This accounts for the growing popularity of easy-peel seals and zippers. They want packaging that keeps the food safe and wholesome and prevents leaks and spills. And they want packaging that provides information like pricing, nutrition, use-by and sell-by dates, cooking/heating/storage instructions, as well as a good product appearance."

Off the mark

Despite these simple and common-sense needs, many packages fall short in one or more of these areas, Keith contends. Because of the critical need to maintain integrity, many retail packages are not easy to open. But with deli packages, the opposite is often true. Since deli product is sliced and packaged at point-of-sale, many wraps are easy to open – in fact, so easy that the products sometimes can fall out or can dry out if stored for more than a few days in the refrigerator, Keith says.

"Many retailers, however, have begun to use recloseable plastic bags to better protect these meats," he adds. "Some retailers even vacuum package these meats on premise, providing more integrity but less convenience."

Deli packages provide far less information than retail products, sometimes none at all, Keith further relays.

Maintaining food safety

Providing and enhancing food safety is the most important function of any food package, insiders agree. Retail packages must provide sufficient sealing and barrier properties to provide wholesomeness from 60 to 90 days, Keith says.

"Some meats and prepared foods have been successful with thirty or less days, but frequent deliveries and careful



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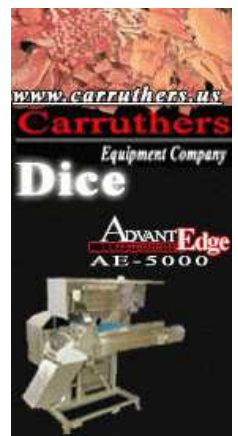


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monitoring are necessary to maintain safety," he adds. "For deli meats, the shelf life is maintained in the distribution packages, but the retailer needs to ensure that his facilities and personnel adhere to strict sanitation and temperature-control standards."

Packaging systems that minimize handling from the beginning of the production cycle to the end when the product is in the consumer's hands are most desirable, Hugg says.

"These systems should be able to utilize the most efficient high-speed films," he adds.

"The main feature we incorporate [in our packaging] is an oxygen barrier," Cryovac's Wilson says. "This helps to preserve the product quality. There are two places an oxygen barrier can be breached: the side wall of the material or in the seal area."

Cryovac's bag product line continues to improve.

"We just released our Series 4000 bags, which features improved toughness," Wilson says. "And our T-Series products are the toughest on the market. In the laminates area, we offer a new E-seal material that's designed specially to seal through meat juices and purge."

Cryovac also looks to develop packaging that will work with any type of post-packaging treatment. Several of its customers use high-pressure pasteurization.

"We had to work in conjunction with them to make sure our packaging holds up to the process," he adds.

In the late 1990s, Cryovac developed its CNP 310 post-pasteurization bag.

"It is specifically designed to go through heat treatment-type pasteurization systems like a Unitherm, Stork, or Alkar system," Wilson says. "We wanted to develop a product that looked like a barrier bag in the case. It had good shrink, gloss, clarity, and great graphics."

Product integrity

Processors cannot cut corners in terms of packaging integrity so their expectations on packaging materials and systems are high. Vector Packaging's full line of casings offer superior oxygen and moisture barrier properties, Hugg says. Vector casings have a patented process that creates adhesion to the meat surface that eliminates purge – a major source of bacteria.

"Our new line of SmokeKote® and ColorKote® casings transfer smoke flavor and/or caramel color to meats and offer protection against contaminants through cook, chill, and transportation; in instances where product is transported from one facility to another for slicing and packaging, this is critical," Hugg says.

Product produced in Vector casings can be stored for extended periods of time at proper refrigeration—totally protected from contaminants, he adds. Deli products produced in Vector casings can go from the stuffing equipment at the processing plant to the deli case without human contact.

Vector Fresh Wrap™ lid films for modified atmosphere packaging [MAP] applications like ground beef or turkey or meat cuts like steaks or chops offer excellent barrier properties and superior anti-fog characteristics, Hugg says.

"Fresh Wrap can be printed with vivid graphics, which combined with its clear, fog-free surface, really appeals to consumers," he adds. "It also goes on the tray tight and stays tight. It offers outstanding product safety and extended shelf life when compared to soft-wrap products."

Vector-80 high-abuse shrink bags eliminate the need for bone guards, diapers, or unsightly patches, allowing for a much more visually appealing presentation, Hugg points out. V-80 can also be printed for more retail impact, he adds.

Robbie uses only top-quality films from the best-known film manufacturers. These films have been proven extensively by retailers and processors to meet the highest standards for durability and safety, Roberts says.

"Our films are selected to meet the needs of specific applications," he adds. "These needs may include puncture resistance, moisture barriers, tamper evident, and desired gas transmission rates. The specific film and sealing characteristics are chosen to keep product fresh and safe for the consumer."

Packaging films need to be puncture and leak resistant for both freezer and deli cases. Roberts continues.

"Frozen foods can have sharp edges that can easily tear packaging and give ease to tampering," he adds. "Deli packaging is handled many times in case before chosen; therefore, it must have strong seals to prevent tampering. All packages should include safe handling information, a use-by date, and an 800 number for consumer questions."

Nutrition labeling is another packaging must.

"Sixty-four percent of consumers said that nutritional labeling on packaging is a trusted source," Roberts says. "Providing recipes and instructions helps consumers with quick-meal preparation. Research show that a clock indicating when product was prepared in the deli ranked No. 2."

Serving suggestions are a big help to today's consumers.

"Many processors ask us to print photographic art of their cooked entrée on the package to spur consumer ideas on what kind of side dishes to prepare with the entrée," Roberts says.

Cryovac's Simple Steps packaging exhibits an extraordinary design, Wilson says.

"It provides many consumer benefits," Wilson adds. "It provides product visibility to the consumer for pre-cooked products; you can see a three-dimensional version of the product versus a product packed in a pouch, which gets a little lost. It provides a high level of food safety and package integrity for the consumer. The raw product is put into the package, cooked in the same package, chilled down, shipped, and displayed. The next person who opens it is the consumer. It preserves product quality and freshness through vacuum packaging."

"It is also easy-open, self-venting, no tools required – just a pair of hands," he adds. "It's a pretty simple design in terms of putting it in a microwave, pulling it out, opening it, and you can eat product right from the package."

Cargill Meat Solutions has done an outstanding job of creating an attractive retail presentation with its line of ground beef and patty products, Hugg says.

"The coordinated line looks great in the case and does an excellent job of communicating to the consumer," he adds.

Packaging graphics are becoming increasingly important.

"As you look at the labeling, the high-quality process print, especially products after they're cooked and sitting on a plate, they seem to be more important," Wilson says. "Gloss and clarity are important for product packaging in a retail deli. All of these things combined are very important to catch the consumer's eye."

Package design must cater to the on-the-go lifestyle of the busy consumers with easy-opening features and recloseable zippers, Roberts says.

"High-end, attention-grabbing designs will help differentiate products on the shelf, but the ability to easily identify the product inside the package through a large clear window is an added benefit consumers love," he adds. "Robbie's Hot N Handy® Pouch designed to hold hot and cold deli products like fried and rotisserie chicken, pork, ham, and turkey products, was developed with these features in mind."

Chicago-based Alcan Packaging offers ClearShield™ bone-in shrink bags, which feature multi-layer film that yields superior puncture protection while reducing the processor's cost per head through better overall performance, says Frank Kitchel, marketing director. The film is totally clear.

"We like to think that's a nice advantage," Kitchel says. While initially designed for non-retail cuts, a retail version of the film is in development and is expected to be in the market soon.

Back in the 1980s, it was important for heat-and-eat entrée packaging to be dual ovenable, but this is no longer the case.

"Dual-ovenability is disappearing as a need for refrigerated entrées," Keith says. "The time it takes to reheat an entrée in an oven begins to negate its convenience, especially for a refrigerated item that can be reheated in a microwave in less than three minutes."

The future

Consumer needs for convenience, integrity, and product preparation information will continue driving improvements in retail and deli meat packaging, Keith says.

As the aging baby-boomer population grows larger, Roberts says the main needs for meat and deli packaging will be:

- Packaging that contains healthy information, portability, ease of use, and food safety
- More convenience and versatility – Research shows that 97 percent of consumers would pay more for better, more convenient and versatile packaging
- More innovative packaging – Innovation in package design and graphics will help differentiate products on the shelf
- Larger print, particularly for preparation and food-safety issues, will become more important as baby-boomers' eye-sight diminishes with age. NP

Technology providers participating in this feature include:

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- Cryovac/Sealed Air Corp., phone (864) 433-2000 or (800) 845-3456, e-mail cryovac.mkt@sealedair.com, or visit www.cryovac.com
- Robbie Manufacturing Inc., phone (913) 492-3400 or (800) 255-6328, e-mail pennys@robbiemfg.com, or visit www.robbiemfg.com
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Converting from cans to pouches

More products are converting from cans to pouches, says Anthony Catino, executive vice president for Tuxedo Park, NY-based VersaPack.

"Many products are being developed for a wide variety of applications," he adds. "Anything in a can may be packed in a retort pouch. We have developed our trade mark for our retort pouch – the SCR (for steel can replacement] Pouch."

VersaPack's major focus is providing complete systems for processing, filling, and sealing foods that are to be pasteurized or sterilized in pouches. United Packaging and Processing Systems is VersaPack's sister company.

"We sell the rotary filling and sealing equipment to fill and seal pre-made pouches, and we also sell the retort equipment for thermal processing," he adds. "We also have a variety of materials for retort or pasteurization. We have a clear, retortable material that features up to a two-year shelf life on a shelf-stable product by using special films."

Major features of its SCR Pouch are it is shelf stable, microwavable, and it incorporates a Zip-Pack Retort Zipper for recloseability.

Many overpackaged home meal replacement products could benefit from the pouch, Catino says.

"Some of these products are cooked roasts in a pouch. It's cooked in a bag, then it goes inside a tray, and then that's overwrapped with a cardboard sleeve," he adds. "If you package such products in a retort pouch with a zipper, you can eliminate this over-packaging."

Graphics are printed on the SCR Pouch using the rotogravure process. "Marketers are looking for eye-popping graphics," he says.

Food safety is also enhanced by the retort pouch process, he relays.

"What goes in the pouch stays in the pouch," Catino points out. "There is no repackaging or chance of post-packaging contamination."

Looking to the future, security features will also become more important.

"There are security features we're developing that will allow consumers to know whether a package has been tampered with -holographic images, security tapes, and other things can be applied to packages to protect the product's integrity."

VersaPack, phone (845) 667-5000, e-mail acatino@versapack.com, or visit www.versapack.com

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