
FLEXIBLE PACKAGING: US packagers are finally popping the top on innovation

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When it comes to food packaging innovation, Europe and the United States are worlds apart. While the former has been at the forefront of change, Americans have been slower to accept creative concepts such as pull-ring tops and pouches.

"It's the difference between night and day," said Gene Leo, project director at Omega Research Associates, Pittsburgh. "In the U.S., the food can is considered a commodity, which hurts the industry. In Europe, they've developed shaped cans for greater appeal. In Germany, for example, they have a soup can shaped like a kettle."

About 70 percent of food cans in Europe have easy-opening ends compared with about 40 percent in the United States, according to John Nutting, publisher of the British metals packaging industry publication *The Canmaker*.

However, that's starting to change as food processors tout the advantages of the new products. Many of the changes are being driven by the need for enhanced functionality, and Nutting expects the United States will match European penetration in the market for easy-opening ends in a few years.

The proof is in the pudding. Research shows that product packaging makes a huge difference to consumers, who are willing to pay more for the convenience of easy-opening ends. Indeed, consumer preference has clearly shown that the brands converting to easy-opening ends experienced increased sales. Nutting pegs those gains at an average of 6 to 7 percent annually, but notes that the overall use of food cans is declining by about 2 percent a year in the United States.

"Campbell Soups was the first to roll out easy-opening ends in the U.S. around 2000. The American food market lagged behind Europe because of concerns about getting sued if someone cut themselves on a can," he said.

Bumble Bee Foods Inc., San Diego, Calif., for example, has launched new Easy Peel Sensations, lightly marinated tuna in 5-ounce servings in easy-to-open flip-top aluminum cans supplied by Impress USA, a Bloomsburg, Pa.-based unit of Impress Group BV, Deventer, the Netherlands.

Another example is a product from FFP Packaging Solutions Ltd., Northampton, England, known as the Qbag. The Qbag is an aluminum foil pouch with an easy-peel and self-venting window that works equally well in the oven or on the barbecue. The pack can be used to separate meat and vegetable dishes and leaves the barbecue clean after cooking.

Even the lowly teabag is changing. Tstix, an aluminum/laminate tube produced by the Chicago-based Alcan Packaging Food & Tobacco Inc. division of Alcan Inc., Pittsburgh, features thousands of micro-perforations in an easy-to-use package that doubles as a stirrer-a

combination of package convenience and superior protection. The package is placed in a cup of boiling water and stirred until the beverage reaches the desired strength.

"Tea is really just the beginning," said Geoff Stuart, president and inventor of Tstix. The perforated stick pack opens up a new market and product delivery opportunities for other products that dissolve, infuse or disperse in liquid, including coffee, soup, hot chocolate, fruit-flavored drinks, vitamins, cough and cold medications and frozen foods that dissolve in water or milk.

Silgan Containers Corp., Woodland Hills, Calif., has come out with a new line of colored aluminum cans designed to stand out on the grocery shelf. The cans can be manufactured in a wide range of translucent colors for maximum shelf appeal and differentiation, which can be extended to can ends and tabs. The pigment is added to the coating that is applied to the product by the aluminum company. The coils are then delivered to Silgan's plant, where they are drawn and redrawn into cans.

A 2006 packaging study by Perception Research Services, Fort Lee, N.J., revealed that color options are an important component in product differentiation, with 68 percent of all purchase decisions made at the store shelf, according to Silgan.

"Marketing aspects coupled with the high recycling rates associated with metal will be a strong driver for these innovations," Carolyn Takata, Silgan's director of marketing, said. "And based on overseas commercialization, the next new metal can trend we expect to hit the U.S. shelves are shapes and colors. Technologies have evolved in recent years which have enabled shaped can production efficiencies and quality, in both aluminum and steel, to compare favorably with traditional metal. We expect these innovations will help increase metal can unit sales."

Another product, the UltraPeel retort (sterilized) membrane end from Sonoco Products Co., Hartsville, S.C., is for heat-and-eat food applications. The membrane is the first such closure to be manufactured in the United States, according to the company. The UltraPeel's advantage is that it allows food companies to offer an innovative closure without sacrificing manufacturing efficiencies, according to Howard Coker, division vice president and general manager of Sonoco Phoenix, the company's manufacturing division. It also can be seamed at high speeds on existing equipment with only minor modifications.

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