

Sealing the Trifecta

Convenience, sustainability and shelf appeal are the winning ingredients for successful fresh food packaging applications.

By James Dudlicek

Connecting with shoppers at the shelf is crucial for food packaging concepts, and innovations in fresh food packaging are no exception.

"More and more, purchase decisions are being made inside the store and directly at the retail shelf," says Paul Weitzel, a consultant with Barrington, Ill.-based Willard Bishop, discussing the "first moment of truth" concept. "It's that first moment that has a lot of trading partners looking for new solutions to better connect with shoppers."

The folks at Cargill have presented one solution. "Shoppers have spoken and Cargill has listened," says David Bisek, associate brand manager for the Wichita, Kan.-based meat producer. "They told us their No. 1 frustration with current fresh beef

have little cooking experience.

Grantwood packaging provides an easy peel-to-open tab, and includes cooking instructions and simple recipes for novice cooks. Each vacuum-sealed package has a 30-day shelf life, which provides shoppers with more flexibility and helps retailers reduce shrink.

Elsewhere in the meat case, packaging design agency Aisle 9 came up with a way to help client Superior Farms sell more lamb products — historically slow movers — at Albertsons markets in California.

"We needed to make sure people saw the new items and were instantly enticed to pick them up."

—Angela Gentry, Superior Farms

packaging was the fact that it leaked. They leave a mess in grocery carts, they stain car upholstery, and they necessitate refrigerator cleanup during storage."

So, Cargill launched a new beef brand that targets the demand for more convenient packaging. Grantwood Meats beef is vacuum-sealed in a leakproof package that helps keep the product fresh and is freezer-ready. The case-ready brand targets the growing consumer segment of at-home cooks who are time-starved and

"Superior Farms came to us looking for a way to increase consumer attention to lamb," recounts Greg Feinberg, president of Los Angeles-based Aisle 9. "We looked beyond traditional packaging and created a system of highly visual sleeves to call attention to the product and differentiate the pre-marinated products from all other items."

Superior Farms, based in Davis, Calif., created the pre-seasoned, pre-marinated product line as an easy way for consum-



A push to drive sales of lamb products inspired a new packaging design at Superior Farms (above). Meanwhile, regulations restricting petroleum-based foam trays prompted development of meat trays made from corn-based compostable foam (left).

ers to enjoy lamb products, but needed consumers to sit up and take notice. Aiming to differentiate these products from the rest of the meat case, Aisle 9

designed innovative chipboard sleeves that showcase the texture and rich seasonings of the new offerings, as well as communicating the high value of this easy-to-prepare product.

"We needed to make sure that people saw the new items and were instantly enticed to pick them up and try them," explains Superior Farms marketing manager Angela Gentry. "We feel this is really a home run and can help revolutionize lamb for today's shopper."

Meanwhile, in the deli, Robbie Flexibles has enhanced the convenience and sustainability of packaging for prepared foods.

"Designed in response to consumer needs in the growing rotisserie chicken market, Robbie's Hot N Handy Pouch allows retailers to replace conventional deli packaging such as rigid roaster domes, boxes, barns and tubs," notes Drew Lericos, director of marketing at the Lenexa, Kan.-based company. "Leak-resistant and microwaveable, the pouch has a built-in handle and resealable zipper that offer shoppers convenience and security."

After a great response from retailers and shoppers, Robbie expanded the Hot N

Handy concept to include pouches in a variety of sizes for both hot and cold deli foods, including fried chicken, ribs, chicken nuggets and tenders, turkey products, and pre-packed lunch kits.

Compostable Concepts

Between consumer concerns and new regulations, packaging has become more environmentally friendly.

Lake Forest, Ill.-based Pactiv Corp. has rolled out compostable foam meat trays made from corn, marketed under the trade name EarthChoice, in Seattle, where city officials have banned the use of petroleum-based foam products for grocery and food-service sales.

"This is a revolutionary step to cut down on landfill waste, and we're delighted to be the first supermarket we know of worldwide to adopt the system," says Brad Halverson, VP of marketing at Seattle's Metropolitan Market. "Our customers will now be able to redirect an estimated 1 million meat trays per year — about five 53-foot trailers full — into compost."

Not to be outdone, Cryovac has its own corn-based meat tray. Dubbed NatureTRAY by maker Sealed Air Corp. of Duncan, S.C., it's purported to be the first foam tray in the United States made with NatureWorks polylactic acid (PLA) polymers, which have been used to make plastic bottles.

"Our partnership with NatureWorks has enabled us to create a tray for supermarkets made entirely from an annually renewable resource," observes Richard Douglas, Cryovac's marketing director for rigid packaging. "NatureTRAY keeps with consumer demand for sustainable packaging."

Flush with the market success of its Hot N Handy pouches, which won a 2008 Gold Award in Environmental and Sustainability Achievement from the Flexible Packaging Association, Robbie Flexibles has now unveiled Fresh N Tasty, a new standup pouch designed specifically for fresh-cut produce.

The pouch has a gusset at the bottom to hold the package upright, prevent spills and keep product away from the liquid purge, creating a more appealing appearance for consumers. A proprietary zipper placed above the large viewing window guarantees closure and enhances freshness. And, like its older brother, a handle at the top of the pouch allows for easy carrying of the product. Laser micro perforation technology allows only the correct amount of oxygen to enter the package based on the specific type of produce being packaged, yielding an extended shelf life.

Further, Robbie says the manufacturing process for the Fresh N Tasty pouch uses significantly less energy when compared with current standard rigid containers, and is lighter, so it takes up less landfill space. "The added benefits of this flexible

Green Concepts Are in the Bag With Retailers

As some state lawmakers and grocery stores aim to phase out disposable shopping bags in an effort to reduce waste, packaging suppliers are tackling the issues from different angles.

Southington, Conn.-based Mettler Packaging has brought its line of durable, eco-friendly plastic shopping bags, as well as its pioneering "Everlasting Bag" concept, to the U.S. market. Mettler's ecoLoop and other premium bags have been widely used in the European market for decades.

Mettler reports that about three dozen retailers nationwide are using its bags, which shoppers purchase for a small fee at the checkout counter. The consumer then uses the bag until it's eventually recycled by the retailer through an existing recycling program. Because Mettler's bags are sturdier than typical thin plastic bags, this concept effectively puts an end to double bagging for durability. The Everlasting Bag concept not only decreases the amount of plastic bags in circulation, but also reduces the number of bags retailers need to purchase and provides high-quality bags to the consumer.

Mettler Packaging's bags are notable for their high quality and sharp print, which contribute to retailers' overall marketing and branding efforts. The company's innovative flexographic printing won first prize in the Grand Prix Cyrel awards for excellence in the international carrier bag category.

In 1992, Mettler pioneered the trend toward providing recyclable bagging options. EcoLoop bags, the company's recyclable option, are made using at least 80 percent post-consumer recycled materials.

"Our green packaging solutions offer the best option for retailers in the U.S. because we are able to offer strong bags with first-class print that greatly cut back on waste as well as cost," says Wolfgang Trossen, Mettler's director of U.S. operations.

Meanwhile, the Veggie Bed Co. is out to make the produce section a little greener. "We created the Veggie Bed specifically to help grocers address a vexing problem — how to offer their customers a viable alternative to plastic bags in the produce section," explains Carlos Leet, CEO of the Petaluma, Calif.-based company.

One difficulty has been compliance with state and local regulations, which require grocers to subtract the weight of reusable packaging from the total weight of a purchase. Without a convenient way to do so, many grocers rely on throwaway plastic produce bags. The Veggie Bed offers three proprietary ways to conveniently tare the scale to remove the weight of the bag, including a revolutionary bar code-scanning method that requires no additional keystrokes for checkers.

The company claims that for every customer who uses a Veggie Bed instead of plastic bags, a grocer will help keep 1,000 plastic bags from ending up in the trash. That seems like a perfect fit for retailers like Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods Market, which recently began using Veggie Beds in its northern California stores.



“Value-added business is a growth sector.”
—Bill Robbins, Village Farms



Crunch Pak is a pioneer in convenient packaging for ready-to-eat produce.

package clearly demonstrate an advantage over rigid containers with its ability to maintain excellent product quality, save fossil fuels, reduce weight of solid waste and provide overall a more consumer-friendly package,” notes Lericos.

Vegging Out

As the nation strives to eat healthier, packaging is going to play a crucial role in attracting more consumers on a frequent basis to more nutritious food choices like fresh fruits and vegetables.

Willard Bishop’s Weitzel cites data from the Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council establishing nine key consumer needs for grocery shopping. The top need is “care for family,” suggesting that shoppers will be on the lookout for products they deem,

Packaging Has to ...

- Support store and format image
- Support shopper need states
- Support stocking efficiencies and reduce handling costs
- Ensure the right amount of shelf inventory
- Support retailer sustainability practices
- Do a better job of protecting product and reducing damage

—Paul Weitzel, Willard Bishop

at first glance, to be a benefit at home. As such, putting naturally healthy foods like fresh produce front and center in more convenient and freshness-enhancing packaging is a win-win scenario.

What's in your bag?



ecoLOOP® carrier bags from Mettler Packaging:

- Reuses plastic to reduce waste.
- Made with 80% recycled plastic waste.
- Costs less than conventional plastic bags.
- 100% recyclable.

ecoLOOP®
 for bags that don't cost the earth

 **METTLER**
 PACKAGING LLC
 PAPER AND PLASTIC PACKAGING
www.mettler-packaging.com

Mettler Packaging is Europe’s largest manufacturer of paper and plastic carrier bags, where it is known as Papier-Mettler. The company is committed to efficient, environmentally-conscious manufacturing processes to offer the most comprehensive range of paper and plastic carrier bags, including all earth-friendly alternative materials.

Sweet Innovation Lowers Coke's Carbon Footprint

Your next bottle of pop may have sugar inside and out.

The Coca-Cola Co., based in Atlanta, has unveiled a new plastic bottle made partially from a blend of petroleum-based materials and up to 30 percent plant-based materials. The PlantBottle is fully recyclable and has a lower reliance on a non-renewable resource, and its manufacturing process reduces carbon emissions compared with petroleum-based PET plastic bottles.



"The PlantBottle is a significant development in sustainable packaging innovation," says Muhtar Kent, Coke's chairman and CEO. "It builds on our legacy of environmental ingenuity and sets the course for us to realize our vision to eventually introduce bottles made with materials that are 100 percent recyclable and renewable."

The PlantBottle is currently made through an innovative process that turns sugar cane and molasses, a by-product of sugar production, into a key component for PET plastic. Coca-Cola is exploring the use of other plant materials as well.

Coca-Cola North America piloted the PlantBottle with the company's Dasani and sparkling brands in select markets last year, and with Vitaminwater this year. The innovative bottles are identified through on-package messages and in-store point-of-sale displays. Web-based communications will also highlight the bottles' environmental benefits.

"The PlantBottle represents the next step in evolving our system toward the bottle of the future," says Scott Vitters, Coke's director of sustainable packaging. "This innovation is a real win because it moves us closer to our vision of zero waste with a material that lessens our carbon footprint and is also recyclable."



Village Farms took the occasion of opening a new distribution center to expand its value-added packaging options for fresh produce.

"Packaging is very critical for us," says Tony Freytag, director of marketing for Crunch Pak, a Cashmere, Wash.-based apple producer and marketer. "Showing the

"Packaging is a complex issue, and there are many demands placed on getting the package right."

—Paul Weitzel, Willard Bishop

product rather than covering it up with a lot of graphics is crucial."

Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, Crunch Pak is a pioneer in bringing ready-to-eat sliced apples in convenient on-the-go packaging to market. The company hit upon the right formula to keep an apple crisp and fresh after it was sliced: a combination of vitamin C and calcium to prevent spoilage, and breathable packaging to ensure quality during transport.

"The snacking category continues to grow, and we are addressing it," notes Freytag. "We will debut a number of new products at the upcoming shows in October."

On the opposite coast, Village Farms has enhanced the value-added packaging capabilities at its new distribution center.

The New Castle, Del.-based produce grow-

er and marketer has added several new packaging formats to meet the demand for more user-friendly fresh produce. New items from Village Farms include 2-pound and 6-count bags of sweet bell peppers, 2-pound tomatoes on the vine, 3-pound Roma and beefsteak tomato clamshells, 2- and 3-pack long English cucumbers, and 8-count mini cucumbers.

"Value-added business is a growth sector for Village Farms," says Bill Robbins, the company's director of distribution center operations.

And as the quest continues to convince corpulent consumers to improve their diets and increase their intake of fresh foods over processed foods, packaging will play a key role in making fresh food shopping more convenient. Going hand in hand with that are environmentally friendly packaging solutions, along with the perennial need to catch the shopper's eye.

"Packaging is a complex issue, and there are many demands placed on getting the package right," Weitzel says. "There is an increasing need to include emerging shopper elements into packaging design." ■