

Why Designing the Flexible Package Is An Exercise in Form and Function

Today, packaging is regarded as a strategic marketing tool to better position new products, stimulate flat sales of traditional products, and reinvent mature brands. More often than not, when designers and marketers consider new package formats, flexible packaging is put on the table in the mix of options. Increasingly, flexible packaging is being chosen over traditional formats.

A trip to the local supermarket reveals that the shift to flexible packaging is taking place in every aisle. Cartons and canisters are being replaced or partnered with standup pouches with reclosable zippers. Retort pouches create value-added line extensions for tuna, “wet” pet food, and other products traditionally marketed in steel cans. Frozen foods in convenient, graphically rich flexible packages enjoy improved visibility and marketability in lighted upright freezers.

Innovations in flexible packaging offer benefits of both form and function for well balanced design. Standup pouches, side gusseted “quad seal” bags, single-serve pouches, and pouches with separate compartments for multiple ingredients are all examples of solutions that provide a broader range of product development alternatives for the packager and a higher level of convenience for consumer. A host of ingenious new features—reclosable “slider” zippers, hang holes, handles, tear notches, laser scores, and spouts, to name a few—add convenience, build brand identification, and improve the dynamics of the product-package-consumer interface.

Small wonder that flexible packaging has become the most rapidly growing form of packag-

ing. Experts in the field agree that designers will do well to learn how flexible materials are revolutionizing the packaging business by reinventing the way products are being marketed for use by millions of consumers.

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Can Be “Brutal” Out There

Packaging veteran Bill Lewis, a consulting editor for Packaging Strategies, outlines the steps needed for a solid entry into flexible packaging design. “Designers should acquaint themselves

with the basic principles of proper material selection, seal methodology, and printing technologies, as well as the limitations of these elements,” he says.

“The package you design must travel under difficult and unpredictable shipping conditions, endure hot and cold temperature variations, and survive a brutal distribution channel to reach the retail shelf. There it must sell itself to consumers, delight them through the entire consumption cycle, and then invite them back to buy it again.”

Mona Doyle, president of Consumer Network, a consulting firm that works with consumer product companies on packaging issues, notes that the “ultimate flexible packaging design” is in the eyes of the consumer, and that there is no single formula for success. “The designer must think about how the consumer wants to use the package,” she says. “What was ‘good’ a couple of years ago may be considered ‘mediocre’ today. The goal of any pack-



age design should be to add convenience and functionality to the experience of using the product. When you think you've got it right, re-check the final design with the customer."

Bob Hogan, vice president of Minigrip Zip Pak, agrees that satisfying the end user is the sine qua non of flexible package design. "Consumers not only expect to have the ability to reclose a flexible package, they demand it," he says. "They also are much more astute as to how the zipper actually performs. It is no longer an exercise of just adding a zipper profile to provide perceived convenience, but to incorporate an application-specific zipper design to suit the product, meet consumer expectations, and provide total satisfaction."

A well designed flexible package is one that can "sell itself to consumers, delight them through the entire consumption cycle, and then invite them back to buy it again."

Easing the Transition

Wander Reijnders, president of IPN USA, a supplier of specialty spouts and fitments for liquid applications, believes that the inclusion of familiar convenience features in flexible solutions is encour-

aging consumers to accept the change from rigid to flexible forms of packaging.

"The addition of zippers and spout closures will continue to add a high level of functionality to the design aspect of flexible packaging," he

says. "Consumers are well acquainted with spouts and zippers, and industry cooperation has dramatically improved the commercialization of these pop-

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Flexible Packaging Resource List

The following list of flexible packaging material suppliers is by no means a complete industry directory, but a cross section of key suppliers serving the North American market. Many

Packaging Converters

Alcoa – www.alcoa.com
Bemis Flexible Packaging – www.bemis.com
CLP Industries LTD – www.clppackaging-solutions.com
Nordenia USA – www.nordeniausa.com
Pechiney Plastic Packaging – www.pechiney.com
Pyramid Packaging Group – www.pyramidflexiblepackaging.com
Glenroy – www.glenroy.com
Peel Plastic Products LTD – stevec@peelplastics.com
Cello-Foil Products – www.cello-foil.com
Amgraph – www.amgraph.com
Alcan – www.alcan.com
Smurfit Flexible Packaging – www.smurfit-stone.com
Printpack – www.printpack.com
Plassein Int. – www.plassein.com
Exopack – www.exopack.com
American Packaging Corporation – www.ampkcorp.com
Sonoco – www.sonoco.com
Rollprint Packaging – www.rollprint.com
Winpak – www.winpak.com
Pliant Corporation – www.pliantcorp.com

of the flexible packaging converters listed here also provide pre-made pouches and bags. You may also use the Flexible Packaging Association (www.flexpack.org.com) as a supplier resource.

Pre-Made Pouch & Bag Specialists

Bischof + Klein – www.u-packbag
Kapak Corporation – www.kapak.com
Technipac Inc. – www.technipacinc.com
Pactech – www.pactechpackaging.com
Specialty Films & Associates – www.specialtyfilms.com
Valley Packaging & Supply – www.vpind.com

Reclosable Zipper Specialists

LPS Industries – www.lpsind.com
Presto Products – www.fresh-lock.com
Pactiv – www.pactiv.com
Minigrip Zip-Pak – www.zippak.com
SIG – www.sigeasynap.com

Reclosable Spouts & Fitment Closures

Creative Packaging Corporation – www.creativepkg.com
IPN USA Corporation – www.ipnusa.com
Menshen Packaging USA – www.menshen.com

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ular convenience features in the market.”

Obviously, the selection of the proper substrate is a critical element in the design of any flexible package. Modern flexible packaging substrates can be custom designed to provide precise levels of barrier protection for a broad range of applications. “Depending on the product, packaging properties can be adjusted to increase barrier, increase puncture resistance, and optimize shelf appeal while meeting critical cost parameters,” notes Scott Lamerand, product manager of Pechiney Plastic Packaging, a maker of flexible packaging for the food and healthcare markets.

One supplier that has built its success on tailoring flexible packaging solutions is Curwood, a division of Bemis. Curwood has pioneered the development of barrier films to make flexible packaging a reality for many products with highly specific protection requirements.

John Hackinson, vice president of marketing for Curwood, says that flexible packaging has enabled many companies to economically provide line extensions to mature products. The trend, he notes, is especially prevalent in the packaging of



single-serve products, marketed as lunch box items or “on the go” snacking.

“The ability to cost-effectively provide a single-serve size that is not only convenient, but can maintain freshness with each individual serving has revolutionized the way many novel products, including yogurt and puddings, are consumed today,” Hackinson says. “The possibilities are lim-

ited only by the package designer’s imagination. In some instances, the package is becoming the product itself.”

Dean Hoss, president of Pyramid Packaging, another flexible packaging supplier, recommends taking a “systems approach” to flexible package design. “It is important to approach the subject from the very fundamentals of how the package is going to be used, to whom the package is going to be marketed, and in what way the package is going to be presented in the market,” he says. “It is important to look at the total solution, not just the primary package.”

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Power of “Visual Enticement”

Appearance is a powerful factor in the design of flexible packaging, notes Joseph Fiore, vice president of sales and marketing for packaging solutions provider Nordenia USA.

“Clients realize the power of packaging and the positive effects of visual enticement. This is the ability of the graphics and photo imagery to get the consumer’s attention and then get the sale.

“We have clients that have increased their sales over 130 percent with just slight packaging enhancements and greatly improved printing,” Fiore says.

Durability is another key ingredient of successful design, according to Jim Bradley, vice president of development for Cello-Foil Products, a manufacturer of flexible packaging. He says that the designer and packager must consider “the entire process in which the package will be handled through distribution channels to be sure that it

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Substrate Review: Flexible Film

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gets to the consumer safely and with good integrity. Proper barrier protection and structural package integrity are as important as the ethics and functionality of the package.”

Law Burks, marketing manager of Pechiney Plastic Packaging, urges designers not to forget that the marketing of a flexible package may vary depending upon the outlet being targeted.

“Positioning your product at convenience store or supermarket level will be different than at the club store level,” Burks says. “Price point, package size, and the features you include in the design may be influenced by many factors. As a result, your design planning should take in consideration distribution, marketing, and consumer demographic issues. Also consider how your design can evolve as technology changes.” ■

Dennis Calamusa operates AlliedFlex Technologies Inc. (www.alliedflex.com), a consultancy specializing in flexible packaging solutions for product marketing applications. Contact him at (941) 923-1181 or at dfc@alliedflex.com.