



Steady growth of flexible packaging

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Barry Mansfield looks into brand-owners' rapid adoption of flexible packaging in recent years, and assesses why there has been steady growth and how it will continue to thrive.

Flexible packaging is the most economical way to package, preserve and transport food, beverages, other consumables, pharmaceuticals and items that require an extended shelf life. Barrier properties are tailored to size, contours and the specific end uses of products, while other barrier formats typically adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Flexible packaging now comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and appearances, and can involve various components, including handles or opening and reclosing features, such as zips and spouts.

According to Smithers Pira, the global demand for flexible packaging is expected to reach \$248 billion by 2020, making it one of the fastest-growing sectors. The technology involved has progressed dramatically during the past decade, and is steadily moving into new markets and applications. What started with simple monolayer bags and wrappings has ended with co-extruded, or laminated, engineered multilayer and coated constructions, which use materials such as plastics, paper, and metal foils and additives.

The food industry is projected to account for three quarters of global consumer flexible packaging consumption. Meat, fish and poultry are the largest sub-sectors in food, followed by confectionery and baked goods. This type of packaging has been growing at an average annual rate of 4% in volume. Despite massive industry-wide adoption – particularly in FMCG – flexible packaging sometimes fails to meet the investment objectives of brand-owners. For instance, cereal manufacturers have significant investments in existing bag-in-box equipment.

Waitrose is working hard to reduce the amount of packaging its ranges need.

Asda is home to the I Am Super Grains line, which uses vibrant and modern packaging to draw in health-conscious consumers.

Asda's ready-meal pouch was developed by TCL Packaging and B&G; Products. This impressive packaging can be frozen or is suitable for cooking at high temperatures.

Packaging with added benefits

According to Mintel, flexible packaging use has increased significantly in the consumer packaged goods category during the past six years. Around a third of consumers view it as being a vital part of the retail experience. It also offers some additional decoration and marketing opportunities to brand-owners. Mintel reckons brands will continue looking to pouches to capture consumer attention, as the next generation of rigid/flexible hybrids combine function with environmental benefits and fantastic shelf presence.

Early 2017 brought a marked shift in this direction, with Kellogg's MorningStar Farms brand moving its veggie burgers and nuggets from bag-in-box cartons to flexible pouches that employ Zip-Pak's DoubleZip. The closure uses two sets of interlocking profiles that are cleverly spaced to guide the customer's fingers when sealing a package. This makes it easier to align, providing a secure and complete seal each time the product is used. However, the frozen category is still dominated by the bag-in-box rigid package format.

The new zipper-based, stand-up and flow-wrap packages are more cost-effective, but the objective of most brand-owners is to elevate point-of-sale impact. A successful example of this is Cape Cod's Bags of Cash promotion bag, which was awarded a Gold Award for printing and shelf impact by the Flexible Packaging Association (FPA) in March 2017. The bag typically puts the brand's kettle-cooked chips front and centre, but for this promotion, the bottom half of the bag was filled with US dollars and a golden metallic money pouch. The package provoked inquiry and added extra shelf appeal by combining matt film with metallic elements.

Starbucks' limited-edition México Chiapas coffee bag won the FPA's Silver Award in the same category. As the beans are grown in a region with diverse wildlife, the company chose to feature a jaguar on the package, which is rotogravure-printed and four-ply laminated with spot-matt lacquer. As with the Cape Cod promotion, this bag was created to boost shelf appeal through a design that consumers would want to display at home.

Kellogg's also opted to use flexible pouches for its muesli and porridge brands in its bid to appeal to people with healthier, more mobile lifestyles. This change communicates its message through the flexible, tough and environmentally friendly packaging. Noel Geoffroy of Kellogg's spent "big chunks of time" with consumers, and saw how many of them stuffed cereal into plastic bags in order to "take it along for snacking", while exploring how the company could also gain the attention of older children and young men – neither of which are notable porridge fans.

Flexible packaging has traditionally had poor environmental credentials, but there are signs that this may be changing as brand-owners are taking steps to mitigate the problem. Waitrose's corporate press officer, Laura Blumenthal, says, "We are continuing to work on cutting down our packaging. We're getting close to our target of reducing this by 50% compared with 2005." She gives the example of an egg box used in the Duchy Organic range that has been constructed from a mixture of rye grass and recycled paper, which not only saves 77t of wood and paper annually, but also requires 60% less water to produce.

Waitrose has also made small changes across its own-brand range that have led to big reductions; for example, moving steaks from trays to flat vacuum-packs saves 30t of packaging a year, while switching to half-sleeves for ready meals saves 127t of paper annually. Blumenthal adds that the company is constantly weighing up its options.

"We're working with suppliers and packaging manufacturers to develop and source alternative materials, especially for black trays," she adds.

Increasingly flexible

So, why has there been a big industry-wide transformation over the past five years? John Nelson, commissioning editor at Smithers Pira, says numerous factors influence the decision to switch from rigid formats like glass jars to laminates or pure plastic pouches. The latter cost less in terms of raw materials, but they are also lighter to reduce harmful emissions, therefore conforming to the corporate citizenship ideals of major brands. There are also a range of new caps and other fixtures that help to make flexibles more practical across various FMCG segments.

According to Nelson, a disadvantage with pouches is that they can be "viewed as a cheap solution for a cheaper product" by consumers, and this has skewed their use. It may be important to note that pet and baby foods have been penetrated the fastest by pouches, and are segments in which the consumer has no say in the purchasing decision, he adds. "This is being countered with better multi-layer plastic formats, print effects and new technologies, like high-transparency windows that can display the product directly," Nelson states.

Barrier performance is essential for food. New flexible formats that deliver the performance suitable for retort packaging are gaining market share, including those that do not require an expensive, not-easily recyclable aluminium layer. "Flexible plastics and laminates have suffered from the fact that they are hard to recycle. Even though savings in materials and transport costs would typically outweigh this, that's less well understood by customers and affects their use," Nelson points out. Technologies coming to market enable the recycling of multi-layer and laminate materials.

Industry focus has recently shifted to more flexible formats in new areas; for example, TCL Packaging and B&G Products' ready-meal pouch that launched in Asda last year. It is 'the first of its kind' – with a printed doypack that took a year to develop – and has the ability to be frozen or used in microwaves and conventional ovens at up to 200°C. This pack is also made from a PET structure to ensure maximum rigidity and stability during cooking.

Practical use

Being flexible can also satisfy highly specific cases, such as the Heinz pouch that is equipped with a wide spout to provide bigger chunks and more textured food to babies of ten months and older. When the innovation was rolled out across stage two (seven months and older) products, sales jumped by 17%. Gaëlle Vernet, who was a brand manager at Heinz prior to joining Bel, notes that 25% of meals are consumed away from home, leading to a demand from parents for "the right texture and nutrition for their children at each stage, without compromising on convenience".

In Asda, four lines of the I Am Super Grains product launched in 400 stores last year. Vogueish ingredients and flavours come wrapped in vibrant and modern packaging that is designed to reel in young, health-conscious consumers who desire quick, satisfying and nutritious meals. Co-founder Barney Mauleverer says the aim was to appeal to “adventurous types who are less likely to cook these meals from scratch”. High in protein and fibre, the grains supposedly help customers stay fuller for longer, and can be added to meals or eaten on the go.

Closing technology has also boosted flexible packaging. Reclosing fixtures on pouches, or for the film on a rigid tray, cuts food waste and increases convenience. In addition, work is being done on child-resistant closures that could increase the use of flexibles for, say, household and garden chemicals.

Another important element to consider is the speed of food and beverage lines that use form-fill-seal technology. These are rising, helping to make the transition to flexibles more attractive for brands and converters.