



PACKAGING

Natalie Locke Milne

Down to Size

Efficient packaging practices can spell big rewards for processors

Streamlining product packaging may seem like a no-brainer to producers looking to trim operating costs. Streamlined packages require fewer materials, resulting in lighter, smaller and more efficient shipments. This is especially significant for producers who use plastic, a material that relies heavily on oil for its production. “More efficient packaging can reduce warehouse, distribution and transportation costs, and consequently energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions,” says Patrick Smorch, manager of Packaging Technology at Georgia-Pacific’s Innovation Institute, in his study *Nine Steps to Greater Profitability and Sustainability*.

Knowing where to begin can be the most daunting challenge for processors making packaging changes. A public database maintained by the U.S.-based National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the U.S. Life-Cycle Inventory, was established to help processors and retailers do just that, by assessing the environmental impact and lifecycle of their packaging. By being able to assess the long-term impact of each packaging material on the environment, processors can then make more informed decisions with regard to choosing the most biodegradable options for packaging.

Thinking outside the box has become the norm for many small Canadian companies. Toronto-based ShaSha Bread Co., for example, uses recycled materials and is streamlining product packages wherever possible. Sweetpea Baby Food not only uses recyclable Co-PP plastic trays, but has also reduced the size of these trays. “We’re also using a sleeve rather than a closed box for the outer packaging, and have condensed the thickness of the sleeve,” says Eryn Green, co-founder and CEO of the Toronto-based company. However, reducing product packaging does come with its own unique set of challenges. Peter Cuddy, president of Touché Bakery, explains: “We are an environmentally conscious company, but our gourmet biscottis are a delicate cookie that can break very easily. So we have to bear that in mind if we don’t use the proper packaging.”

In ShaSha’s case, implementing ecological policies has helped the company save money, as well as reduce its carbon footprint, says president Shaun Navazesh. “By provid-

ing our products in reusable containers, a few times a year our customers can buy the products in the bag and when they get home they can use the tube for storage.” The company has also infused conservation into its overall business approach. “All of our equipment is cleaned with hot steam pressure washers, we don’t over-package our products, and we support other environmentally conscious companies and groups by purchasing our grains from organic farms and buying local as much as possible,” says Navazesh.



Sweetpea Baby Food’s trays are made from recyclable Co-PP plastic.

Aside from trimming down shelf-ready packages there are a number of ways companies can further reduce the use of packaging materials. According to Smorch, “material optimization” is an effective option. “Material optimization through fibre reduction can be achieved three ways: by using innovative package design that utilizes less corrugated board; by using less fibre

within the corrugated board; and by using lower basis weight material,” he says. London, Ont.-based Touché Bakery has had success with this approach. “We’ve reduced our packaging, doing away with larger, more difficult materials, we’ve switched to recycled packaging, and are going with smaller pack sizes and tighter fitting corrugated,” says Cuddy. “This has significantly reduced our costs, and eliminated two different types of packaging, polyethylene and a hard backing board, with just one cardboard sleeve.”

Smorch also suggests “cube utilization” as a way of further conserving fuel. “In some cases, mixed products on pallets can contribute to poor use of space,” he says. Smorch recommends “placing pallets in a ‘pin wheeled’ position to maximize cube utilization and prevent excessive load movement in the truck.”

Retailers like Wal-Mart have also joined the pursuit to streamline packaging. After months of buzz, Wal-Mart president and CEO Lee Scott officially unveiled the company’s green initiative, “Sustainability 360,” in February. He outlined Wal-Mart’s commitment to “work with suppliers to reduce packaging by five per cent by 2013,” noting that it would be the equivalent to “removing 231,000 trucks from the road and saving 324,000 tonnes of coal and 67 million gallons of diesel fuel per year.”