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# Clamshells: Not As Simple As They Look

Consumers are paying attention to how the produce they bring home is packaged.

BY SUZY LOONAM

**Although simple in design — a clear, thermoformed plastic container most often connected by a hinge — there's more to clamshell packages than meets the eye.**

Exactly how much more is anyone's guess. John R. Burke, president of the Foodservice and Packaging Institute (FPI), Inc., Falls Church, VA, notes there are no statistics specific to clamshell packaging. When asked how many clamshells are being used by produce departments, Burke gives his "Carl Sagan" answer — "billions and billions." He believes no one knows the exact number of clamshells used in produce "because the market is too spread out."

The varying compositions and broad arrays of applications, including those used for food and non-food items, complicate clamshell-use studies.

Demand for high-visibility packaging, which includes clamshells, is expected to increase steadily at 5.1 percent per year and reach \$8.5 billion by 2010. That's an estimated 32 billion units requiring 900 million pounds of plastic resins, according to a study by Fredonia Group, Inc., Cleveland, OH. The study, *High Visibility Packaging — Market Research, Market Share, Market Size, Sales, Demand Forecast, Market Leaders, Company Profiles, Industry Trends*, was published in November 2006.

Largely driven by health and conve-

nience trends in consumer buying, about half of the demand for all plastic packaging is in the food packaging category, including produce, baked goods and prepared foods, such as whole meal packages, according to the study.

Mike Levy, director for the Rigid Plastic Packaging Group at the American Chemistry Council (ACC), Arlington, VA, notes his organization does not track clamshells of all kinds, but he shares foodservice statistics for polystyrene clear solid (OPS) used to make many clamshells.

Clamshells made from OPS are divided into two usage categories: foodservice and packaging/one-time use. Polystyrene (solid and foam) represents 7.5 percent of all plastics made, according to the *High Visibility Packaging* study. Of the approximately 6 billion pounds of polystyrene resins sold or used actively by produce suppliers, 52.7 percent is used for packaging and one-time use; 72.7 percent of that packaging is used for foodservice.

"Clamshells [foam and solid] are just one of many foodservice polystyrene items that make up this 72.2 percent of packaging and one-time use category — the total of which is about 2.25 billion pounds of polystyrene," Levy calculates. But that's foodservice, and while there is some crossover, ACC stats do not include retail produce sales.

Regardless of the numbers, clamshells have been a boon to produce marketing. They can be packed manually or by machine. They display produce nicely and add stability for delicate items, such as strawberries, blueberries and herbs. They don't leak or crush like bags, paper cartons and plastic baskets, so there is less decay in the container, enhancing food safety and extending shelf life.

"Plus, they're cheaper in the long-run," states Kurt Zuhlke Jr., president and CEO of Kurt Zuhlke and Associates, Inc., Bangor, PA, who adds that recyclable clamshells are 20 to 25 percent cheaper than other popular packaging devices. "They're good for the environment. They're just the right way to go."

According to Ed Ezbicki, national sales manager of agriculture products for Pactiv, Lake Forest, IL,



"The clamshell offers better visibility to the product, enhances the product and gives opportunity for better shelf life and quality. Retailers also have a wider range of merchandising opportunities afforded to them, including cross-promotional programs. The consumer gets better quality produce along with the convenience of a package that allows for easier storage."

Clamshells may also foster consumer confidence in food safety, as many clamshells are now available with tamper-evident lids. Plus, better-closing clamshells prevent dangerous and unsightly spills in the produce department.

## SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

For all the good they do in produce marketing, there is still a clamshell conundrum, one that pits cost against sustainability, food safety and consumer preference.

Sustainability — the cradle-to-cradle energy cycle of a product — is a colossal consideration, especially for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., Bentonville, AR, and its buyers, sales associates, customers, vendors and communities.

In 2005, Wal-Mart took the lead in the sustainability movement when CEO Lee Scott introduced a 3-pronged sustainability plan to be supplied 100 percent by renewable energy to create zero waste and to sell products that sustain resources and the environment.

Wal-Mart has committed \$500 million annually for sustainability projects and measurable reductions in waste, according to an online report, *2007-08 Sustainability Report*.

Two thousand vendors are already using Wal-Mart's sustainability scorecard, which evolved from the company's list of favorable attributes known as the *7 Rs of Packaging: Remove, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Renew, Revenue and Read*. According to the report, the new scoring system is to be introduced in 2008 and will require suppliers to respond to a manufacturing, farm and/or supply chain questionnaire. This will generate a relative score for key sustainability measures, such as water use, energy use and waste. Wal-Mart buyers will use the scorecard in their purchasing decisions.

Wal-Mart, Whole Foods Market, Austin, TX, and its recent acquisition, Wild Oats Markets, Inc., Boulder, CO, have embraced the use of the highly sustainable polylactic acid (PLA), a biodegradable plastic most often made from corn. The largest producer of PLA resins is NatureWorks LLC, a Minnetonka, MN-based company owned by Cargill Dow, the largest corn merchant in the world, which is also based in Minnetonka, MN.

Matt Crosin, vice president of member services at the Packaging Machinery Manu-

facturers Institute, Arlington, VA, recommends companies review their packaging. "That means how you make it and what you make out of it. If there are opportunities to eliminate waste, do it. Any manufacturer worth its salt will look closely at manufacturing processes."

## FOOD SAFETY INNOVATIONS

The future for clamshells is endless, particularly in terms of food safety, states Pactiv's Ezbicki. "Growers receive the satisfaction that their product gets from the field

to the consumer with the best quality and protection possible, and the consumer can view the product better and know that when the product is transferred from the store to their house, it will be protected."

Inline Plastics Corp., Shelton, CT, offers a unique line of tamper-resistant, tamper-evident and leak-resistant clamshells with built-in tear strips, which eliminate the need for shrink bands. "They're convenient because your lid is attached," notes Herb Knutson, director of marketing. Retailers don't have to worry about running out of lids because they're always right there."

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Beyond convenience, Inline's Safe-T-Fresh clear clamshell containers allow consumers to see the product better and ensure no one has tampered with it.

Sambrailo Packaging, Watsonville, CA, has made changes in its clamshell packaging to reduce tampering and spillage, according to Jim Scattini, director of marketing. "We've had to adjust lids and closure apparatuses, and make our labels, so they double as tamper-evident locks."

In terms of produce, "Safety trumps sustainability," Crosin states. With lives at stake, he believes, "food safety is a bigger

issue, and packaging plays a significant role in protecting the food supply."

Crosin forecasts greater government involvement in food-chain protection, and possibly a merging of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Future packaging might contain freshness indicators. "Companies are developing bio-indicators to be used in packages to reveal viruses in meat. I could see that being applied fairly easily in produce," predicts Crosin. "Some pathogens are always in fresh food, but the bio-indicator will turn red when those get to an unhealthy point."

Zuhlke's Zuhlke says food safety is a major priority for consumers, and the clamshell is the perfect solution. "Whether you're talking bakery items or products in the deli or produce departments, clamshell innovations ensure food is secure and no one has tampered with it."

Dave Sexton, vice-president of marketing for Maxco Packaging, Parlier, CA, and a self-proclaimed "box guy," agrees clamshells are

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**— Dave Sexton  
Maxco Packaging**

important to safeguarding consumers. "For food safety, clamshells are No.1. They have gained in popularity, and that will continue."

#### CONSUMERS' CHOICE

In the years ahead, sophisticated, health-conscious shoppers are expected to continue to seek highly visible clamshell packaging for some of their produce purchases, while retailers will increasingly influence the materials from which clamshells are made.

When there is a choice, consumers may follow the green road, selecting a more expensive bio-plastic clamshell based on the package's renewable chemical composition and biodegradability. Unfortunately, they may be frustrated later by a lack of appropriate recycling facilities and an inability to home-compost "biodegradable" clamshells.

Other consumers may prefer the less expensive petroleum-based clamshell item, while hard-core greenies may avoid clamshells and plastics completely. To satisfy them all, retailers will need to offer a thoughtful balance of products, packaging and combinations of each.

Considering the issues hinged to the use of clamshells, it seems clear that the simple clamshell is a complicated, unfolding lesson in produce marketing.

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