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Packaging Quality

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Fast-casual diners expect packaging that reflects what are billed as higher quality meals. Does your packaging pass the test?

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- Ones to Watch
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As the fast-casual segment continues its pursuit of take-home diners, packaging issues are coming to the forefront of an industry that for many years focused predominantly on in-store ambience as a key competitive advantage. Therefore, while the casual dining segment will no doubt continue looking for themed décor, the hippest background music, and the latest nutritional trends, perceptive quick-serve chains are beginning to understand that those old-fashioned doggie bags just don't make the grade.

"Putting take-home food in a Styrofoam container or a brown bag almost gives the customer a perception they are taking home garbage," says Theron Downs, professor emeritus at Michigan State University's School of Packaging. "Perception is reality. Food tastes better out of a better package. It's been proven in product after product, over and over again."

To be sure, fast-casuals can't get away with quick-serve packaging and still expect to grab market share away from the fast-food camp. Increasingly sophisticated consumers are willing to pay more for fast-casual fare and expect packaging that reflects what they pay.

Could packaging eventually become a point of distinction for diners? Might they choose Restaurant A over Restaurant B based on which brand has packaging that keeps the food hotter? It's too soon to tell, but one thing is certain: the takeout packaging buzz is getting louder. So loud, indeed, that Chicago-based foodservice consulting and research firm Technomic, Inc. recently launched the Takeout Packaging Consortium to monitor the dynamics of an evolving foodservice packaging industry.

"There is significant interest in takeout packaging from disposable packaging manufacturers," says Technomic spokesperson David Hankis. "Off-premise dining has grown twice as fast as on-premise dining over the past five years. Today, half of all restaurant meals are considered takeout. Our studies show 59 percent of fast-casual restaurants view packaging as an important strategy for enhancing their takeout program. This data has real implications for foodservice packaging manufacturers."

What kind of implications? Those of upscale packaging. Hankis says packaging manufacturers are beginning to recognize that consumers are the ultimate driving force of foodservice-related trends in an \$11.5 billion packaging industry that just keeps growing. Freedomia Group, a Cleveland-based business research company, predicts a 4.3 percent annual growth rate through 2007 based on increased consumer willingness to pay for convenient, ready-to-eat, away-from-home offerings.

"Perhaps one of the most important facets of food packaging is convenience, particularly in fast-food environments," says Sze Ooi, segment manager for the packaging and specialty division of MeadWestvaco Packaging Resources Group. "Materials should go easily from freezer to oven or from a takeout restaurant to the table without sacrificing strength or losing package shape. Customers must be able to rely on a carton or drink cup not to leak, collapse, or have the bottom fall out, leaving them with a mess instead of a meal."

Ooi hit the highlights of foodservice packaging challenges today. But they bear repeating. Beyond the obvious mandate of portability, the purpose of takeout packaging is threefold: to keep the food hot (or cold), to preserve its presentation, and to offer convenience. The truth is if your customer arrives home with the lukewarm food spilling out into the floorboard, you might forever lose that customer. So spending a few cents more on packaging pays dividends over the long haul.

"What some operators still don't seem to understand is that every person who carries out their meal instead of eating in the restaurant is not making a mess in your facility," says Ann Kahn, principal of the national retail research firm Kahn Research Group. "Few operators have been able to really wrap their minds around the fact that it's alright if you have to pay more for takeout packaging because these people are not wearing out your restaurant."

Take-home packaging has to keep hot things hot and cold things cold for at least 20 to 30 minutes and withstand higher temperatures in the oven and microwave for quick reheating, according to John Burke, president of the Foodservice and Packaging Institute (fsi). "The commodity end of the takeout packaging business offers products that last 10 to 15 minutes. It is expected to be grease resistant, leak resistant, and insulated," he says. "Take-home packaging is designed around the understanding that people are not necessarily going straight home after picking up the food. You might still have errands to run, but you want your food to be hot when you serve it up at home."

Take-home packaging presents a different challenge that requires a heavier emphasis on tight seals and thermal

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values that Burke says is often accomplished through a combination of different materials, like aluminum and paperboard, foam with polypropylene or hinged containers placed inside a thermal bag. “Packaging is not just a convenience issue; it’s becoming a safety issue, too,” Burke says. “If something is refrigerated, you don’t want the temperature to rise too high and if it’s hot you don’t want it to drop too far for health reasons. Packaging has to address a myriad of concerns today.”

What exactly is upscale packaging? It might mean different things to different people, but to Jeff Wooster, value chain manager of flexible packaging for Dow Chemical Company, it means going beyond the basic protection of the product. “If you can enhance the consumer experience, then you can extract more value from the consumer,” he says. “Clearly, the atmosphere of the restaurant has a large influence on the price that you are willing to pay for your meal, but with takeout you don’t have the atmosphere so you have to provide some differentiated value to your consumers. One way you can do that is by giving them a premium package.”

Reynolds Food Packaging division works closely with foodservice to develop products that help operators provide extra value to diners. Take its plastic Dual Ovenable Container and Lids, for example. These containers can withstand temperatures of -40 to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. If the family meal for four was just too much to finish, diners can use the same packaging to store the food in the refrigerator and the same packaging to reheat it again later. For busy professionals and harried parents, a night with no dishes is worth its weight in filet mignon.

Back to the presentation issue, preserving the presentation of the chef’s creation is necessary for today’s discriminating diners. Premium packaging allows take-home diners to enjoy the visual appeal of the chef’s artistic creation. Reynolds Reynowave Plates, Bowls, and Lids takes plastic packaging innovation to the next level to simultaneously solve the temperature and presentation issues. The FSI winner for “Best Plastic Foodservice Package” is compartmentalized so the potatoes don’t touch the greens. It’s also microwaveable, which means the lid won’t melt into the plate when you nuke it.

Reynolds is not the only company working on presentation. Genpak’s one- and three-compartment black foam hexagon containers also assure on-the-go diners leak-free carry out capabilities with a tempting view of the entree under the clear, snap-on lid. And Pactiv recently introduced a new product in its Roseware line. Foam Hinged Bowls offer a glossy, upscale appearance with sculpted walls and its sturdy double-laminated construction give an air of elegance to takeout. Reynolds, Genpak, and Pactiv are all on the stackable bandwagon with packaging that incorporates rims to make stacking multiple orders a cinch. Pactiv is taking convenience one step further with its new SmartTote Foam Handled Boxes with a double-laminated design tough enough to stand up to the demands of transporting fried appetizers, chicken wings, and family sized entrees.

For the kids, Pactiv and Dixie Foodservice are competing with lines of animal-themed plates. Pactiv was first with its Hefty Zoo Pals plates that feature more than 50 different animals. The plates are constructed of heavy-duty coated paper for sturdiness and soak-through resistance and feature two smaller components for condiments and one large component for entrée items. The plates can be used in the microwave oven for reheating what the kids don’t finish. Dixie’s Crazy Kritters line of disposable products features a cast of bright animal and creature characters designed to help operators tap into the growing trend. Dixie’s complete line includes character riddle cups with lids and straws and brightly-colored forks and spoons.

While durability and strength are keys to successful takeout packaging, upscaled packaging also means upscaled marketing opportunities, according to MeadWestvaco’s Ooi. “Packaging is being called upon more and more to fulfill a marketing value, particularly in regards to secondary packaging,” he says. “Food companies look to the carton to promote quality, upscale brand images, and corporate identities. Many companies are also using their packaging for cross-promotional and partnership opportunities.”

Because of this increase in the aesthetic aspect of the package, the printability of paperboard and its ability to project crisp, superior graphics is key. That’s why MeadWestvaco recently enhanced the printability of Kraftpak by improving its surface smoothness, which facilitates better graphics and a more striking, eye-catching presence on the natural, brown background.

“Fast-food manufacturers are starting to recognize how [paper] can bring a more high-end, premium feel to their products, particularly when it comes to more homemade, organic foods,” Ooi says. “For home-style products—baked goods or comfort foods—natural brown appearance can project a wholesome or old-fashioned look. Its unique look presents an eye-catching contrast in a sea of white packages, so it helps products to stand out and promote themselves as something different and special.”

And isn’t that what it’s all about in an ultra competitive marketplace—being different and special?

“Putting take-home food in a Styrofoam container or a brown bag almost gives the customer a perception they are taking home garbage.”

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