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'Sustainable' food packaging: a mixed bag

Biodegradable, compostable, recyclable food packages are popular in theory. In practice: pricey or just hard to make

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The frozen peas from Stahlbush Island Farms tend to stand out in the freezer at the grocery store. They're in a brown bag -- a heavy paper bag with a biodegradable liner -- rather different from the dependable plastic packages that have kept veggies from getting freezer burn for decades.



Sun Chips: can you not hear me now?

The Corvallis, Ore., company had to spend only five or six years trying to get that package right before rolling it out in April. Then, said Debbie Cozzetto, director of sales and marketing, the company started getting calls from other processors and manufacturers to find out how it was done.

Sustainable food packaging is becoming all the rage, and a lot of food companies would like to be part of that trend. But don't expect an overnight change even if more folks are on board with the idea of biodegradable, compostable, recyclable and otherwise sustainable.

It isn't easy finding packaging that fits the new demands and still delivers good food to customers. Often either the technology isn't there or the cost is unworkable.

Or there can be other unforeseen issues. Take the case of Frito-Lay's SunChips snacks.

In 2010, the company introduced a compostable snack bag made from plant-based materials. Environmentalists cheered.

Then it turned out the bags were, well, loud. Annoyingly so. The "Today" show found the bags were louder than a New York subway car.

Last month, the company introduced a new bag that it promises is quieter. There's even a video on the Sun Chips site, www.sunchips.com, touting the improvement.

Noise issues aside, food just presents different challenges than other goods.

Phil Anson, founder and chief operating officer of Evol Foods in Boulder, Colo., would really like to put his company's frozen burritos in something more sustainable than a plastic film. But shifting temperatures -- going from chilled delivery trucks to freezer cases and so on -- create difficult issues.

"There's a reason that people have been using petroleum to wrap this stuff," Mr. Anson said. "It works really well."

Still, momentum -- and innovation -- is building behind packaging shifts, and it doesn't hurt that big industry players are starting to see this as a competitive issue.

In February, the H.J. Heinz Co. held a joint news conference with Coca-Cola to say it would roll out more than 120 million retail and food-service bottles of ketchup this spring using bottles made partially from the residue of sugar cane. Coke is licensing technology that it has used since 2009 to the Pittsburgh ketchup company.

In mid-March, PepsiCo made its own media splash by announcing it had developed "the world's first PET plastic bottle made entirely from plant-based, fully renewable resources." The bottle, according to the company, will be made from materials such as switch grass, pine bark and corn husks, although eventually Pepsi hopes to also use orange peels, potato peels and other agricultural byproducts.

Sounds great, although the company doesn't plan to start production of the new bottle until 2012.

These things take time.

But they do seem to be picking up speed. Pike Research, of Boulder, Colo., last year estimated the sustainable packaging sector was growing fast, with "eco-friendly" packaging revenues expected to rise from \$88 billion in 2009 to \$170 billion five years later. In particular, more sustainable plastic packaging is expected to be the fastest growing area because it is one of the biggest segments anyway.

One ongoing problem is the lack of agreed-upon standards for terms such as recyclable or eco-friendly. Then there are debates about the environmental impact of say, glass, which has long been used in packaging but may take more energy to recycle than metal cans, said Mr. Anson at Evol Foods.

He now knows more about packaging issues than he knew a decade ago, when he launched his burrito business with a fresh product slapped with labels from his ink-jet printer. Eventually the line moved into the frozen food aisles of grocers such as Whole Foods Market and Giant Eagle.



In January, Evol launched a new line of gluten-free entrees -- in flavors such as chicken enchilada and fire grilled steak -- packaged in bowls made of a compostable material made using sugar cane fibers, a byproduct of the sugar-making process.

Energy behind the issue is coming from different places. Megaretailer Wal-Mart threw its weight behind improving sustainable packaging a while ago, which has created some momentum among vendors that supply the chain's hundreds of stores.

And small food companies, like Stahlman and Evol, founded with a focus on natural ingredients and environmentally friendly ideals have embraced the packaging issue as a way to stay on message.

They sometimes complain that the big food companies should be more willing to share their techniques so that everybody's packages are better for the planet, rather than use them as a competitive advantage to appeal to consumers.

Another small company pushing for change is Justin's, a Boulder company that makes various types of nut butters, including peanut. Justin Gold, the founder and CEO, grew up in Ligonier and still has relatives in southwestern Pennsylvania. He moved to Colorado for the lifestyle and ended up in the specialty peanut butter business.

Justin's sells squeeze packs that contain two tablespoons of the nut butters, enough to make a sandwich. The packs are made of PET plastic (polyethylene terephthalate, the kind used in soda bottles), at the moment, but Mr. Gold is working on that.

In October, he organized a "Squeeze Pack" summit that competitors, packaging suppliers and other industry players were invited to, with the idea that maybe they could come up with ideas to develop better squeeze packs in a way that would also make it affordable even for small companies.

He said the people who attended decided they couldn't focus both on the source of the packages and the end-use at the same time. They decided to start by finding ways to use more renewable resources to make the packs.

Justin's had hoped to start improving its own squeeze packs by Earth Day in April and, while that doesn't look like it will happen, Mr. Gold said the company was testing four plastic film possibilities that it didn't have before the summit. Peanut butter is a particularly challenging product, he said, because it can be very oily and a packet that fails makes a mess.

Heinz is doing its own thing to improve its squeeze packets. In January, the Pittsburgh food company launched a line of all-natural squeeze packets of Simply Heinz food-service condiments, including ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise and ranch dressing.

Heinz spokeswoman Jessica Jackson says the packets are made of 30 percent renewable materials from the "structural component of plants." Trees and cotton pulps are also used in the converting process, she said.

One thing about more sustainable packaging that most companies agree on: Typically, they cost more than the traditional versions.

For the most part, the food companies say they are trying to swallow the difference in costs but that that could change if the price gets too high. Instead, the hope is that prices could drop as more businesses buy the new packaging materials.

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