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A New Definition of “Primary Package” with Corrugated

Through the eyes of your customers, your primary package today might be cartons, displays, or even shipping boxes.

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What makes a primary package “primary,” *really*? The term has been used for many years to describe the package that most immediately touches the product and carries brand recognition with the consumer.

While that may still be true today, the material that comprises this “primary” package is shifting.

Increasingly, the face of primary packaging is corrugated. Yes, the material long used in shipping for its durability and performance is finding new life with brand managers as a primary packaging option thanks to changing consumer purchasing experiences, technical advances in printing and finishing that allow greater precision and new applications, cost-efficiencies across many areas and an increasingly important sustainability focus.



Photo courtesy of Georgia Pacific

A Wider Purchasing Experience—and Consumer Preference Base

Primary packaging is the first, most engaging—or “primary”—contact with the brand. From a consumer’s experience today, that primary contact might come from many areas: retail displays, a shelf-ready container holding products loosely, a point-of-purchase placard or even a shipping box. And in some categories, it could be “all of the above” due to the multiple ways consumers interact with many brands and products.

Consider a consumer experience at any big box warehouse store: You often walk in and are greeted by a 3-foot-wide self-contained display printed with saturated colors and high-resolution graphics. Wouldn’t those displays be the “primary” package for the consumer, as they engage shoppers directly?

At the other end of the spectrum are popular subscription e-commerce products, such as Sun Basket and HelloFresh meal kits, that leverage the branding and marketing potential of their shipping boxes. These kits arrive at front doors with colorful graphics on the shippers that present the brand in its best light and reinforce the brand proposition. Obviously, these are the “primary” packages to the consumer.

As the purchase environment expands, so, too, do consumer perceptions around the types of packages that will resonate and shape their primary relationship with the brand.

Greater Adaptability Due to Advances in Printing and Finishing

Flexibility is often a top concern for brand managers, as retailers frequently call the shots on acceptable packaging and in-store promotions. Companies that manufacture consumer packaged goods (CPGs) have to be ready to pivot, as a new request from a retailer may result in a sudden desire to shift channel or merchandising solution.

The adaptability of corrugated has made it ideally suited for these situations. It’s easy to respond to new challenges or opportunities—while still being consistent to the brand—thanks to advances in digital printing and finishing that facilitate print precision and consistency.

Corrugated suppliers are able to deliver high-resolution, G7-certified printing in flexo, litho and digital. (The G7 standard is an internationally recognized methodology for calibrating printing presses and proofing systems, guaranteeing color matching and color consistency

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across all printing methods and on all surfaces.) Corrugated now has the ability to meet that print specification throughout the entire retail campaign, irrespective of the print execution format. Color consistency can be maintained across all “primary” packaging types.

Digital printing, in particular, has opened opportunities to corrugated users with its capabilities to cost-effectively support short runs. Participation in regional and special promotions can take a brand to the next level of consumer engagement with high-quality printing and variable data. And because the cost of digital short runs is more reasonable than flexo, brand managers and CPGs can also leverage digital to perform pilot test marketing—or modify a marketing program overnight. Digital allows freedom for the marketing staff to test different themes, strategies and designs to determine which approach works best.

Finishing techniques are also making corrugated more versatile than ever. “Traditionally, when corrugated has been used in a retail setting it’s often been as an afterthought and not as a primary package,” says John Kelley, President of Dusobox Corporation and First Vice-Chairman of the Fibre Box Association. “However, with the progression of finer fluting in corrugating capabilities, the dynamic has changed. CPGs who would typically go with a non-fiber packaging solution are recognizing corrugated can be a consumer-effective packaging solution in the market.”

The biggest opportunities for brand distinction in retail may still be in shelf-ready, point-of-purchase (POP) and customized displays. But corrugated is also making new inroads in traditional primary packaging in many categories.

“New capabilities with respect to die-cutting, creasing, folding and gluing are having a huge impact,” Kelley says. “If a designer can envision a new retail corrugated package design and there’s a logical methodology to folding and gluing it, then the industry can deliver that vision.”

Winning on Cost-Efficiency

It’s important to consider cost when choosing packaging options. As just one example, consider the supply chain savings of a corrugated produce bin. Corrugated shippers and displays for produce are durable, attractive and product-friendly – as well as cost-efficient. In an independent case study, companies that switched from returnable plastic containers (RPCs) to corrugated bulk bins for shipping watermelons were able to decrease their overall supply chain costs by 19.8 percent. What’s more, the corrugated solution garnered an overall supply chain cost advantage of \$1.74 million over RPC bulk bins, amounting to \$2.64 million annually if the RPC bulk bin purchase costs were amortized over their useful life.ⁱ (To read about “Full Disclosure analysis” to determine the most cost-effective shipping material for your particular industry and access other cost-related case studies, see www.corrugated.org.)

Growth in shelf-ready packages that are both sturdy shippers and attractive displays is often attributed to a



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CPG desire to simplify supply chain logistics. Shipping the package loaded with the product in a master case where a simple perf or tear away will allow the retailer to convert the package to a display is easy and cost-effective for both the retailer and manufacturer.

In addition, the light weight of corrugated packaging

brings secondary benefits through low shipping costs, ease of handling and payload efficiency. Studies show that corrugated containers allow greater shipping density than other materials, requiring fewer truckloads per unit volume shipped and significantly lowering the cost of transportation. ⁱⁱ

5 Myths About Corrugated Use

A number of misconceptions and misperceptions exist regarding the use of corrugated. Consider just a few myths below.

Myth 1: “No real innovations have occurred in recent times.” Not so! The strength-to-weight ratio for corrugated has improved recently as more durable material options, better fluting methods and more stable structural designs have penetrated the market. The continuing expansion of shelf-ready packages that are both sturdy shippers and attractive displays benefit from these advances. In addition, science is making possible new types of applications. As an example, many frozen foods manufacturers are turning more to fiber-based solutions due to the advancement of functional coatings.

Myth 2: “Printing on corrugated lacks sophistication.” High-quality flexo, litho and digital printers are producing colorful graphics that grab shoppers’ eyes with clarity and precision. In addition, corrugated packaging providers are becoming G7-Certified, meaning brand color-matching across all substrates and printing methods is guaranteed.

Myth 3: “Unique designs are difficult to produce.” Technological innovations in laminating, die-cutting, creasing, folding and gluing are making elaborate designs more economical to produce at high volumes and high speeds. For instance, a 20-fold shelf-ready package is no longer a challenge for automated corrugated forming machinery.

Myth 4: “Corrugated is too ‘old school’ for shipping.” Corrugated protects products more efficiently than petroleum-based alternatives that might require extra materials to wrap and enclose the product or filling materials for added cushioning. The reliability of performance and the versatility of design in corrugated can reduce packaging requirements and eliminate excessive materials. Let’s face it, corrugated boxes have long been the shipping standard for a reason!

Myth 5: “Consumers don’t care about boxes.” In the era of social media, every brand touchpoint matters. Some consumers even make videos detailing the “opening experience” of their favorite products and packages. And even if they don’t notice the small details that go into packaging, the familiarity of a hassle-free opening experience reflects favorably on the brand. Add to all that the sustainability story inherent in corrugated, and you can rest assured that consumers will “get it.”

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Reaping Sustainability Gains

Corrugated is also known for its low impact on the environment.

The principles of recycling, recycled content and managed forests have long been core tenets of the paper industry: 93 percent of corrugated material that goes into the marketplace gets collected and recycled. Corrugated boxes are a key user of this material. The average corrugated box contains 48 percent recycled content.ⁱⁱⁱ

Renewability is a focus, too. For every tree that is cut down in sustainably managed forests today, the industry plants three more on average, and from 2000 to 2014, the area under forest management certification programs grew from 18 million hectares to 438 million hectares worldwide.

Positioning Your Packaging Strategy for Success with Corrugated

Given the many advantages of corrugated packaging, it may come as a surprise that some CPGs still view sourcing corrugated as an afterthought or see it largely as a commodity for performing a shipping function. Yet savvy brand managers are increasingly recognizing its opportunities to advance their packaging strategy in both function and form.

About the Fibre Box Association and Corrugated Packaging Alliance

The Fibre Box Association (FBA) is a non-profit trade association that has represented North American corrugated packaging manufacturers for more than 75 years. To access corrugated-related educational resources and view upcoming events, see www.corrugated.org.

Corrugated is gaining appeal for all kinds of “primary contact” packaging because it offers versatility of design, presents consistent quality, is cost-effective and carries a powerful sustainability message. No longer for simply loading and sealing at the plant and opening at the store, corrugated is making a greater impact in store displays and shelf use thanks to the value proposition it offers for brand managers.

To think of corrugated boxes as nothing more than shipping containers overlooks a tremendous range of greater possibilities. Advanced printing and finishing technologies give corrugated all the impact—and consumer engagement—brand managers need wherever consumers might touch their brands.

ⁱ 1 “A Distribution and Cost Scenario for Bulk Watermelons,” Case Study, Corrugated Packaging Alliance: http://www.corrugated.org/upload/CaseStudy_Watermelons.pdf.

ⁱⁱ “Corrugated Packaging: Economically Sustainable,” Fact Sheet, Corrugated Packaging Alliance: http://www.corrugated.org/upload/CPA/Documents/Fact_Sheet_CPA_Economic.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Global Forest Resources Assessment 2015,” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4793e.pdf>



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