



With traceability now one of the industry's biggest challenges, transparency in packaging has taken on new meaning.

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

By Meg Major

Packaging trends have long been inherently linked to changing lifestyles and consumer preferences. But with more foods than ever being sourced across international borders, and a spate of recent foodborne illness outbreaks that seems to

become more convoluted and confusing with each passing day, the case has never been greater for creating packaging applications that offer sophisticated and transparent solu-

tions right on down the supply chain.

To be sure, pressure is mounting from retailers, consumers, and even some lawmakers for fresh produce and meat suppliers to provide more

information on how and where their products are grown, and the conditions under which they're grown, stored, and transported as they journey from farm to table. Couple this pressure with the requirements of the forthcoming country-of-origin labeling (COOL) law, set to commence Sept. 30, and it's clear there's room for a bigger role for efficient, sustainable, *transparent* packaging.

Traceability, and the many questions relating to the cost of implementation and compliance, is the focus of the Joint Produce Traceability Initiative Council, set to convene at the end of the summer and anticipated to produce a long-awaited set of industrywide standards.

Sponsored by the Produce Marketing Association, the United Fresh Produce Association, and the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, and comprising roughly 50 companies spanning the foodservice, distributor, retailer, and grower-ship-

per communities, the initiative seeks uniform guidelines and timelines for case-level traceability initially, and item-level traceability down the road.

Hot tomato

The drumbeat for traceability standards had been accelerating in recent years already, but picked up dramatically in the consumer press through the summer, following a protracted, frustrating investigation into a salmonella Saintpaul outbreak that has sickened more than 1,100 people across the country since April, and was at first erroneously linked to fresh tomatoes, with disastrous results.

Appearing in headlines far longer than anticipated, the stalled salmonella investigation prompted consumer groups to call on Congress to mandate traceability systems and production and handling standards for high-risk produce items, among a slate of other related regulatory demands.

At presstime the Centers for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration had finally lifted the ban on all tomatoes after their probe failed to find evidence of contamination along the supply chains involved in the tracebacks.

But the damage had already been done by way of massive pipeline disruption

and economic losses dealt to the North American tomato industry. And the die has been cast in making traceability a prominent issue and requirement for industry action.

Interestingly, “the tomato debacle,” as one major grocery official puts it, sheds light on one of the least discussed, though acutely important, aspects of any efficient traceability system: the ability for producers not affected by a recall to confidently and effectively communicate to the public that their products are safe.

Elliott Grant, c.m.o. for Redwood City, Calif.-based YottaMark, Inc., readily concurs. YottaMark, a company specializing in brand security solutions



The GSI-compliant HarvestMark solution from YottaMark can be implemented without the need for technology in the field.

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based on product codes, has created what it calls the HarvestMark traceability solution, which features codes on labels to provide unit-level traceability information to any constituent in the distribution chain, including consumers, via a secure Internet portal. Different levels of information can be made available to each constituent group. Grant considers this a reliable, affordable solution for instantly tracing produce, meat, and seafood back to the source of harvest.

“In addition to speeding the narrowing of the potential source of contamination, traceability offers the ability to unaffected growers to communicate to customers that [their brands] are *not* affected,” says Grant. He labels the traceability issue “clearly one of the biggest challenges,” adding that traceback problems are often compounded by companies that employ “internal” systems that not only slow down an investigation, but also aren’t designed to provide information quickly to end consumers.

Grant contends it’s essential that company systems be fully compatible with the produce traceability initiative and related global trade item number (GTIN) standard that can be deployed for case and pallet trace-forward and traceback, as well as for full unit-level traceability.

In addition to untold lost dollars, time, and resources, the damage to the industry’s image caused by the series of high-profile food safety scares has been nothing short of devastating, especially for the produce industry, which has struggled mightily to increase consumption in a fragile economy.

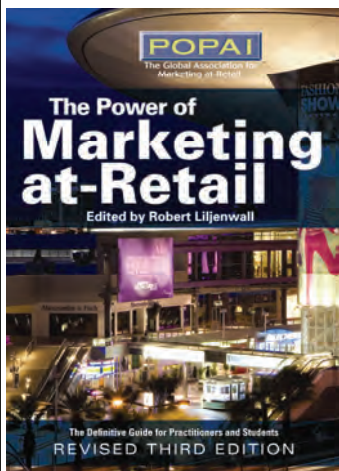
Anyone who’s remotely connected to the produce industry, however, knows just how seri-

Grocery list

Industry organizations have been working on a **joint produce traceability initiative** since last fall.

The group is expected to **finalize implementation dates for case-level traceability** at an Aug. 27 meeting in Chicago.

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ously its players take food safety. "I know it can be hard for consumers to understand just how hard growers and shippers work to

keep the supply chain safe," says Grant. "Something we're striving for with HarvestMark is to give the produce industry an opportunity

to tell its story better." Grant acknowledges that unit-level traceability in the U.S. fresh produce sector is in its infancy, but he says it

would be ideal for some specific produce types, such as field-packed produce and line-packed clamshell product. Watsonville, Calif.-based berry supplier Driscoll's is taking a lead by spearheading efforts to provide unit traceability on a national scale.

"Adoption of unit-level traceability by major brands, such as Driscoll's makes it a lot less risky for other companies to jump in, too," explains Grant. "These early adopters recognized the brand benefits of item-level traceability, as well as the food safety message. We expect that once customers realize they can find out all this interesting origin and safety information on certain brands, they're going to wonder why they can't get it on all their produce."

Wielding influence

It goes without saying that food retailers—particularly the large chains—have tremendous influence over growers' decisions in this and many other areas. "With this

Stemilt lets it flow

TO ACCOMMODATE its diverse mix of organic cherry varieties—including Chelans, Bing, Skeena, Sweetheart, Rainier, and Staccato—Stemilt Growers this summer has introduced FloWrap film into its packaging lineup. Both its organic Rainier and organic dark sweet cherries are being packed into one-pound "punnets" (clamshells without a lid), and sealed with the perforated film.

Marketing director Roger Pepperl says the perforated film allows the cherries to breathe, which helps control dehydration and maximizes stem quality.

Further, since the perforated film is sealed, the FloWrap packaging may also help ease consumers' current concerns over food freshness and safety.

"The FloWrap packaging is great for merchandising organic cherries, which typically remain on the shelves a bit longer than conventional cherries," explains Pepperl. "The package serves to maximize product freshness and is a functional item for today's busy shoppers."

Meanwhile, several retailers are seeing success with Stemilt's field-tested POS cards, which inform consumers about where their fruit was grown. According to Pepperl, "These merchandising tools are a great way for retailers to highlight the sustainable efforts that go into producing our artisan organic cherries."

The Northwest's difficult spring weather and resulting cherry crop reduction didn't put a damper on Stemilt's artisan organic cherry program, adds Pepperl. "Fortunately, even with some of the organic cherry crop reduced because of the spring frost, we had a similar organic crop size this year due to more acreage becoming organic-certified," he says.

The organic cherry market is growing dramatically after three years of running undersupplied, prompting the Wenatchee, Wash.-based grower to plan nearly double its crop of organics by 2009.

For more information contact Stemilt Growers, Inc. at (509) 662-9667.



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influence comes a great responsibility," says Grant. "Retailers have the ability to engender systemic change for the better, such as requiring their suppliers to adopt time/temperature tracking."

Similarly, he adds, grocers play a key role by buying from growers that have adopted well-established food safety standards and verifiable

traceability protocols.

"All retailers strive to bring fresh, safe produce to their customers, but they also operate on very thin margins, and have unimaginably complex supply chains. That means vendors like us have to offer solutions that are cost-effective and practical in the reality of the retail environment."

Good ideas in packages

TRANSPARENCY is just one of many industry challenges being addressed by innovative packaging trends in the food industry. Here are additional examples of the idea that good things come in packages, whatever size they are.

Cryovac seals the deal for 'now and later'

IDEAL FOR SMALLER HOUSEHOLDS, single-dwellers, and empty nesters, the new Multibag from Sealed Air Corp.'s Cryovac division offers the benefits of a barrier bag, with the added bonus of portion control.

Developed with key customer collaboration, the Cryovac Multibag is a vacuum-sealed barrier bag that can be divided into multiple sections. A perforated seal divides the sections, so consumers simply separate and use the portion they need for meal preparation. The rest of the product thus can be refrigerated or frozen in the original packaging for later use.

Since consumers don't need to rewrap the product, the vacuum packaging protects the food from freezer burn.



According to Duncan, S.C.-based Cryovac, cheeses and smoked and processed products, including sausage, are especially suited for the handy Multibag. It can also be used with processors'

existing Cryovac rotary chamber vacuum systems.

For more information call Cryovac at (800) 845-3456.

Norseland goes rigid in the self-serve case

NORSELAND, INC. has taken the wraps off new packaging for pre-sliced Jarlsberg and Jarlsberg Lite products. Fresh-Pak, the first package of its kind for the self-serve cheese section, offers greater consumer convenience with an easy-to-open, reclosable rigid plastic design that protects product integrity, from packing, shipping, and handling to consumer selection in the store, and at-home use.

The tight "quali-seal" Fresh Pak locks in an optimum amount of moisture, ensuring product remains fresher, along with consistent taste, flavor, and aroma "to the last slice," says John Sullivan, president/c.e.o. of Stamford, Conn.-based Norseland.

In addition to guaranteed premium quality, Fresh-Pak is both neat and sturdy, adds Sullivan. "It fits a standard-size peg, and the peg hole won't rip. The clean, simple lines allow ample space for strong product branding; the consumer can easily identify the Jarlsberg logo and characteristic brand colors. The clear package also allows the consumer to better view our



would be the first time U.S. consumers could instantly scan a fresh produce item at the point of purchase and obtain "informative, meaningful, relevant traceability and safety data."



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popular specialty brand that satisfies the needs of retailers and consumers."

Anchor Packaging gets a handle on roasters

ANCHOR PACKAGING, designer and manufacturer of the popular Roaster brand rotisserie chicken merchandiser, has introduced a new handled sleeve option. Unlike other roasters, Anchor's Roaster doesn't require a sleeve, but now the St. Louis-based packaging firm is offering a sleeve option as well.

Geared with SKU reduction in mind, the sleeve, base, and dome sit perfectly in one box. Further, since the sleeves ship inside the same-size box as the standard Anchor Roaster, the sleeves ship freight-free.

The high-quality sleeve graphics, print technology, and heat- and moisture-resistant materials belie the fact that Anchor's new product packs an economical price for the retailer.

Both dome and base are made with microwavable, reusable polypropylene. Domes are easily applied and won't crack like those made of other materials, the company says.

The leak-resistant lid eliminates the need to overwrap with film or tape. Double vents allow steam to escape more freely to reduce condensation buildup. The revolutionary V-lock system prevents moisture from collecting around the flange, to eliminate leakage and improve lid fit. Internal anti-fog provides the ultimate in clarity under hot conditions.

For more information contact Anchor Packaging at (800) 467-3900.



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