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THE POWER OF PACKAGING

Shifting consumer priorities are changing the way restaurants package food both on and off premises. **BY DAVINA VAN BUREN**

Power to the Package

A contemporary packaging program can set your brand apart from the competition.

Manufacturers had their sights set on food-safe packaging well in advance of the pandemic due to year-over-year growth of off-premise dining. When demand for delivery rose, so did the need for packaging that preserves food temperature and texture, which assures the same taste experience as on-premise dining.

“Restaurateurs that recognized the trend of home-delivered meals in 2018 and 2019 had the advantage of experimenting with packaging in side-by-side market trials to evaluate which maintained their food quality for the average 30-minute delivery time,” says Marilyn Stapleton, senior director of marketing at **Anchor Packaging**. “As a result, it became evident that packaging plays a significant role in the food experience.”

That can be good and bad. While a positive packaging experience is often appreciated on a subconscious level, customers always notice—and often comment loudly on social media—when packaging fails.

“If your food arrives, and it’s all over the bottom of the bag, leaks on your lap when you are eating, or traps all the moisture and your food arrives soggy, consumers remember that negative experience,” says Vince Daniel, senior vice president of foodservice at **Huhtamaki**. “Worse yet, your brand name is likely printed all over the packaging that failed, so it’s a critical component to a customer’s experience with a brand’s product.”

Along with the COVID-19 pandemic—which caused takeout and delivery growth to skyrocket—came heightened attention to food safety. Previously, a top concern for both consumers and brands was protecting food products from tampering by delivery drivers. Now, it’s not just about



“Packaging that prevents contact between the product and external contaminants encourages confidence for consumers that their food is safe for consumption.”

whether someone sneaks a few fries, it’s a matter of public health and brand trust, while some might even argue it’s a matter of life and death. At this point, all operators should be using barriers, such as stickers or staples to protect orders from tampering during delivery.

“Consumers are more concerned with safety than ever before, and packaging can play a key role in delivering food

in a safe and convenient manner,” says Walt Coleman, chief commercial officer at **Liquibox**. “Packaging that prevents contact between the product and external contaminants encourages confidence for consumers that their food is safe for consumption.”

In addition to wanting food that is as close as possible to what they would be served in a dine-in scenario and that

hasn't been tampered with, consumers want to know their packaging is free of harmful chemicals and is biodegradable or recyclable. Customers want packaging that will keep their food protected until they can enjoy it without using too much material or ingredients that will have a negative impact on the planet.

During the pandemic, safety and hygiene took a more prominent position

restaurants have continued to operate with skeleton crews due to staffing shortages. Some brands are opting for ghost or virtual kitchens, betting that consumer preferences toward off-premises will continue well into the future.

"Packaging has a huge effect on delivery," says Mark Schlossman, executive vice president of sales and marketing at **Accurate Box Company**. "It's critical

while strong enough to withstand delivery," Coleman says. "This is especially important for large orders, like a coffee-to-go bag-in-box that is often delivered for meetings or social gatherings."

With delivery and takeout, the diner's food experience outside the restaurant is what makes your restaurant memorable. As such, food and its packaging are an extension of the brand experi-



in consumers' minds, so single-use packaging saw an increase in customer acceptance compared with previous trends toward reusable items. Now, focus is shifting yet again, and sustainability is returning to the forefront of restaurants' packaging conversations.

"Since they are conscious of the waste that gets thrown away in their home, customers are demanding more sustainable, lightweight, and space-optimized options," Coleman says.

As COVID drove delivery and to-go markets during the past year and a half, packaging changed in response to consumer behavior. Initially, this trend was driven by government restrictions to dine-in services, but even after restrictions loosened, many quick-serve res-

that store operators can quickly and easily assemble the packaging so the delivery can make it to the consumer as soon as possible. Downstream, the packaging must be strong enough to survive the delivery and take-out process."

Delivery also drives different requirements for packaging. Factors such as leak proofing, security of closures, rigidity, and sturdiness take on greater importance for delivery versus dine-in options. An open food tray in a bag may work for in-person takeout but is likely to arrive spilled and jumbled after a 20-minute car ride. Today's quick-serve packaging needs to be durable enough to protect food and beverage products until their consumption.

"The ideal packaging will be lightweight, so that minimal material is used,

"The ideal packaging will be lightweight, so that minimal material is used, while strong enough to withstand delivery."

ence. Protecting the flavors and effort put into dishes is of paramount importance, since the ambiance of a restaurant doesn't always transfer in delivery.

"If your customers use third-party delivery services to order your food, it's likely that their only experience with your brand is your food and the packaging it comes in," says Nathan Kraatz, marketing specialist at **Inno-Pak**. "It's crucial that packaging reflects your company's brand and values—every carton, container, or bag is an opportunity to showcase your brand to your customers, to educate them,

Recyclable takeout packaging wins over the competition.



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to market to them, and to connect with them.”

Consumers should have the same brand experience regardless of whether they are dining on-site, at home, or on the go. Packaging should clearly convey a brand’s values by demonstrating a commitment to food safety, sustainability, or food quality, for example.

“Packaging also provides a brand with

aging enhances the experience of existing customers and grabs the attention of potential customers.

“In this day and age, consumers are almost as interested in their experience as they are in the overall taste of the food,” Schlossman says. “We have seen great successes with consumers promoting their favorite food or brand simply by sharing photos or videos online. It’s in these situa-

cifically for national chains that are not region primary. “Err on the side of caution where packaging performance is concerned and pay a little more if you have to,” Foxx says.

Looking forward, experts agree that the future of food packaging is sustainability. As climate change becomes a bigger story, consumers and legislative bodies alike are starting to demand change.

“I think we’ll see manufacturers taking significant steps toward developing safe and sustainable packaging that is also affordable,” Daniel says. “Sustainability took a hit during the pandemic as operators turned their focus almost singularly to improving the off-premise dining experience and making it better and safer, but operators shouldn’t have to choose between protecting their patrons and protecting the environment.”

Restaurant operators should anticipate not only consumer demand for more sustainable packaging, but also legislative regulations, too. The expansion of delivered meals and dining out will inevitably lead to more attention from public health authorities on hygienic packaging and more attention from consumers on sustainable packaging solutions. Operators should be prepared to take action as consumer awareness surrounding packaging waste increases.

“One key trend is mono-material flexible packaging,” Coleman says. “This lightweight solution reduces the overall amount of material consumed, plus it’s recycle-ready, so it enables brands to meet their sustainability goals.”

If you haven’t already done so, now is the time to revisit or reinvest in your packaging program. The containers brands serve food in (and the bag it all comes in) can make a big difference in the success of a takeout and delivery program. Not only does packaging offer a chance to connect with current customers, it’s an opportunity to attract new ones as well.

“Packaging can make or break off-premises service,” says Nathan Schultz, creative director at Inno-Pak. “If you want to be at the top of the delivery game, invest in the proper packaging for your needs—your customers will thank you for it.”



GP Pro

“If you want to be at the top of the delivery game, invest in the proper packaging for your needs—your customers will thank you for it.”

an opportunity to engage with its off-premise diners through a well-placed QR code, hashtag, or brand message,” says Alec Frisch, vice president and general manager of foodservice with **GP Pro**.

During the takeout and delivery process, packaging serves as a traveling billboard, and restaurants should be taking full advantage of this opportunity. Colorful, high-quality, full-graphic pack-

tions where printing and branding on the packaging will go a long way in putting a brand on the map.”

As operators contemplate how to improve their packaging programs, they’ll need to consider that while it’s an exciting and innovative time, it’s also one that is rife with supply chain challenges, such as product shortages and shipping delays.

“Operators are facing sparse product availability coupled with the greatly amplified cost of goods—this requires enormous inventory on the highest-cost product many operators have ever experienced before,” says Nathan Foxx, director of category management at **R3 Redistribution**.

“The market will reset itself eventually, and when it does, you will need to have the lowest inventory levels possible.”

In some cases, operators may have to make short-term compromises, such as shifting between substrate types, spe-

The Right Stuff

How to implement a better packaging program.

With the increased focus on take-out and delivery, food packaging options that worked in the past may no longer meet the needs of more safety-conscious consumers who prefer to dine off premises.

“As food travels farther before consumption, customers expect restaurant operators to provide the consistent taste and texture they have come to know,” says Marilyn Stapleton, senior director of marketing at **Anchor Packaging**.

Customers want functional, easy-to-use packaging that provides them with a positive brand experience no matter where they ultimately eat their food. Hot food should be kept hot, while cold dishes, such as salads, need packaging that maintains crispness and chill. Fast food was traditionally eaten on the go, but nowadays, it’s harder to predict when or where food will be consumed. That means operators need to prepare for either scenario.

“Particularly with drive thru and delivery, packaging has to protect and keep food well, and it has to be easy to eat out of or off of,” says Nathan Schultz, creative director at **Inno-Pak**.

When considering a packaging program, operators should consider a number of factors, starting with the type of food that needs to be packaged. Is it hot, cold, greasy, or liquid? How big are the portion sizes? Are items packaged together as a meal or individually? How much storage space for packaging supplies is available inside the restaurant? And, perhaps most importantly, what does your brand stand for, and how does your packaging reflect that ethos?

“While operators can certainly opt for the least expensive food packaging containers available, that would be a missed



opportunity to provide customers with a positive, safe, brand-oriented experience that encourages those customers to return again and again,” says Alec Frisch, vice president and general manager of foodservice at **GP PRO**.

The most crucial question might be the most overlooked. Packaging—particularly in the current marketplace—is a direct reflection of your business, and it can be used to influence the consumer experience on several levels, starting with the back of house.

“Your packaging has to be easy to set up, fill, and pack for kitchen staff, and it has to keep food integrity from the time food is loaded into the package to when

it’s opened at its destination,” Schultz says.

Preparer-friendly packaging saves time, increases efficiency, and saves on food costs associated with spills or overfilling. It’s important to have the sturdy containers that are the right size for each dish—brands that offer portions that look just right, not half-filled or overflowing. Lids should snap tight and create a neat, leak-free barrier.

As concerns surrounding climate change and carbon emissions rise, it’s also important to show a commitment to sustainability, particularly in certain geographical markets.

“Operators should be sourcing sustainable materials, which can be recycled or composted,” says Joe Kofler, president of

delfort USA, Inc. “Such materials should be derived from chain of custody (coc) fiber with composting certifications.”

Partnering with the right supplier can help operators navigate this rapidly-evolving market, especially now, among mass supply chain shortages and shipping delays. Not all packaging suppliers are created equal, however, so take the time to do the proper research.

“It’s important for brands to work with suppliers who understand their busi-

nesses, know the right questions to ask, and have enough breadth of offering to meet their needs with the right packaging options,” says Vince Daniel, senior vice president of foodservice at **Huhtamaki**.

should go deeper to really learn about a brand and each client’s unique dishes, consumer needs, and objectives.

“Packaging suppliers should be trusted partners,” says Walt Coleman, chief commercial officer at **Liquibox**. “More than just offering standard packaging, partners should be able find solutions that are aligned with a company’s values and goals.”

Suppliers should be able to work with restaurant operators to analyze current

cerns in a timely, earnest manner.

“Your packaging is your first impression—it should be important not only to you, but to your supplier,” says Nathan Kraatz, marketing specialist at Inno-Pak. “A good packaging supplier answers the phone when you call, communicates with you regularly, and acts as though they’re invested in your business’s success—because they are.”

Different restaurants have different needs, and a good packaging company understands that. Whether that means



Huhtamaki

HUHTAMAKI / KYLE DREIER

nesses, know the right questions to ask, and have enough breadth of offering to meet their needs with the right packaging options,” says Vince Daniel, senior vice president of foodservice at **Huhtamaki**.

Suppliers should ensure that their products are fit for use and meet the performance requirements unique to the service model of a restaurant’s brand. Packaging partners can also keep operators informed on sustainability trends and new innovations that will help them make better packaging choices.

“All good suppliers should have certified, food safety compliant materials. They should be members of groups such as The Sustainable Packaging Coalition (SPC) to collectively learn more about best practices,” Kofler says.

In addition to providing safe and sustainable packaging options, suppliers

packaging problems and redesign or create new packaging specifically for their brands. Many brands commission custom solutions so that their packaging performs exactly the way they need it to. Packaging suppliers can also help operators by offering printing services.

“For example, how cool would it be for restaurants to change the graphics on their packaging along with every holiday or special occasion?” says Mark Schlossman, executive vice president of sales and marketing at **Accurate Box Company**. “This would enhance the consumer experience, as well as provide many premium branding opportunities for operators.”

Finally, suppliers should demonstrate outstanding business etiquette. They should make restaurants feel important and address communications and con-

listening to restaurants and making recommendations based on needs and challenges or making sure brands don’t run out of a product, industry experts agree a supplier must be a trusted partner.

In today’s rapidly-evolving restaurant climate, operators’ thoughts should be centered around how to best deliver their products to the marketplace, factoring in ease of use for the restaurant and consumer, sturdiness to keep the food organized and untampered with, sustainability to support environmental initiatives, and colorful branded packaging.

“Demand continues to outpace supply, but now is the time to evaluate your current packaging,” Stapleton says. “Consider side-by-side comparison and develop packaging supplier partnerships to be first in line when expanded packaging production investments are available.”

SC

Spending on Sustainability

When it comes to earth-friendly packaging options, consumers are willing to put their money where their mouths are.

Before the pandemic, sustainability was a growing trend in the quick-serve industry. When COVID came on the scene, however, it took a backseat to safety concerns as operators closed dining rooms and scrambled to implement or improve off-premises programs.

Earlier this year, GP Pro conducted a consumer survey to understand what kind of to-go experiences consumers were having since the start of the pandemic.

“Thirty-one percent of consumers said they’re willing to pay more for a meal from a restaurant that uses sustainable packaging materials,” says Alec Frisch, vice president and general manager of foodservice at **GP PRO**. “This is a good indication that while hygiene and safety remain top priorities, sustainability is once again gaining traction—just as it was in the year or two leading up to the pandemic.”

While the pandemic forced innovation in terms of labor management and technological adoption both in the front and back of house, it also created more food packaging waste, since more people are opting for takeout and delivery. As calls for corporate responsibility get louder, demand for sustainable goods is at an all-time high, and many consumers choose the brands they support based on environmental values. In addition, some states are starting to ban single-use plastics, styrofoam, and other non-sustainable packaging.

“This is a continuing trend that restaurants need to proactively implement, especially since it will help a restaurant’s image in the eye of the consumer,” says Mark Schlossman, executive vice president of sales and marketing at **Accurate Box Company**. “Consumers can feel obligated to take their business to a competitor if that competitor is viewed as more



environmentally friendly.”

Consumers want restaurants to be more environmentally conscious, and it makes a lasting impression when they receive takeout orders in paper packaging instead of plastic, styrofoam, or aluminum packaging that will do more harm to the environment—or their own health. PFAS chemicals (also known as “forever chemicals” because they linger in air, soil, plants, sediment—and our bodies—indefinitely) have historically been pervasive in food packaging.

“In this day and age, consumers deserve products which are PFAS free and eco-friendly with no hidden health concerns,” Joe Kofler, president of **delfort USA, Inc.** “The removal of PFAS in quick-serve packaging is of huge importance; it’s essential to the health of our planet and consumers, and brands should take a stance on using new generation packaging alternatives.”

The heightened attention to sustainability means that quick-serve operators should not only think about their to-go packaging, but also their back-of-house packaging. Products like cups, lids, straws, and clam shells are usually the areas consumers and brand owners think of as they are looking at sustainable options, but items like bag-in-box (BIB) flexible packaging can help in the kitchen.

“BIB packaging has a smaller overall footprint and shorter life cycle than the rigid containers many bulk or concentrated items are packaged in,” says Walt Coleman, chief commercial officer at **Liquibox**. “Both consumer-facing and back-of-house packaging can make an impact on consumers and the environment. Sustainable packaging solutions are available on the market—operators just need to get started.”