

Petfood packaging round-up: The latest trends and products

Convenience and customization key in staying on top of the market

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A trend chain that begins with pet humanization has extended through consumers' petfood needs and entered the packaging industry, focusing on convenience and customization.

When it comes to petfood packaging, the trends of the petfood market itself have significant influence-what are pet owners looking for in petfood and treats? What do they want to see on store shelves? The answers to those questions impact what kind of packaging will hold the desired products, and right now, convenience and customization are king.

Pet humanization, the idea that pet owners are treating their animal companions as members of their human family, is the driving force behind a significant number of current petfood trends: health and wellness, obesity control, the desire for specialized food catering to various life stages (in particular very young and senior pets); all of these can be linked to similar trends in the human food industry. The trend chain, naturally, continues when it comes to petfood packaging.

The consumer desire for convenience in packaging as varied demographics (and more people within those demographics) focus more on pets is growing, and the packaging industry is responding. "The changing demographics of pet owners-where they live and shop-affects packaging size, design and distribution requirements," says James Taylor, business development manager-marketing and technology for **Printpack US**. "Expanded distribution for petfood products requires higher performance packaging that extends shelf life, ensures freshness and withstands the rigors of mass market, club and Internet channels."

As a result, plastic packaging is rising in popularity. "Petfood companies are transitioning away from multi-wall paper packaging to flexible plastic packaging, which provides an opportunity for enhanced graphics while also reducing breakage (spoilage), improving the functionality of the packaging for consumers and providing sustainability benefits," says Dan Staker, executive vice president of **Plastic Packaging Technologies LLC**. Adding formats and features to that packaging, such as closure features, handles and other consumer-friendly attributes take the trend to another level. "These features weren't available just a few short years ago, and now petfood companies are racing to incorporate these features into the packaging for their consumers," says Staker. "Without a doubt, these formats and features, along with pre-made stand-up pouches, are expected to experience continued strong growth in the petfood industry."

Plastic Packaging Technologies has more than doubled its available flat-bottom box pouch and single-web bag production capacity to address these trends. The company's product offering includes laminated rollstock, stand-up reclosable pouches, flat-bottom side-gusseted box pouches, pinch bottom bags, single-web quad bags, inno-lok packaging and liquid pouches/packaging. These products incorporate the latest technology for press-to-close zippers, slider zippers, double-track zippers, laser scoring, "hook-to-hook" closures, fitments, spouts and other innovative features.

Mold-Rite Plastics |Stull Technologies | Weatherchem also have several closures available for products within the pet industry. "For pet owners, dispensing closures offer the convenience and ease of use that they need and are coming to expect," says Product Manager Bob Tupta. "For pet product manufacturers, our plastic caps also offer brand differentiation-the ability to stand out on the shelf to attract pet owners with a design that is easily recognized

as convenient and easy to use." Their flapper caps line includes the LiquiFlapper for liquid products, NutraGen II for supplements, the FlapMate for fish and reptile food, and the MegaFlap for petfood, treats and snacks. They also offer CT closures and easy-open disc tops and twist open dispensing closures (for pet care and shampoo).

Convenience for the customer isn't the only consideration driving the trend-petfood manufacturers want their growing portfolio of products to stand out on shelves, and they're looking for convenience of visual marketing and labeling to accomplish that. "Natural and fresh foods are gaining popularity in rigid cups, which offer visibility to product as well as consumer-friendly opening, reclose and storage options," says Taylor. Printpack offers shelf-stable rigid cups, as well as rollstock for form fill seal, retort cups and pouches, premade stand-up and flat-bottom gusseted and fold-over quad seal bags, and woven poly sacks.

"Packaging for petfood has to have an eye-catching appearance in order to promote the brand at the point of sale," says Kristel Davis, marketing manager, Mondri Jackson. "This, along with innovative convenience features, gives our customers high recognition value." **Mondi Americas** offers the combination of consumer and manufacturer convenience in its FlexZiBox package for dry food applications, which includes multiple types of features including top and front sliders, handles, flat bottom, folded bottom, clear or printed gussets. Bags can be hermetically sealed when filled, and the flat bottom design provides better stability for lightweight products.

The importance of ingredient claims, and manufacturers' desires to make those claims stand out, cannot be understated. "Buzzwords such as 'human grade' meats, grain-free, gluten-free and hormone-free are becoming more common," says Tupta. "Along with clean and clear messaging on labels, manufacturers are also paying attention to packaging color, design and convenience in order to stand out on the shelves."



Printpack US

Plastic packaging, as well as customized packaging to better highlight products, are two key aspects of current petfood packaging trends.

The growing variety of petfood options has spawned another must-have trend in packaging-customization. "Product differentiation and shelf appeal have never been more important," says Staker. "Increasingly, the package is really used to sell the product. As such, the petfood industry continues to seek new product configurations and innovative printing technologies to ensure their products stand out on the shelf."

Flair Flexible Packaging Corporation offers Titanium plastic packaging, an alternative to poly-woven multi-paper wall bags that allows for significant shelf appeal options. Titanium can hold up to 50 pounds with resistance to punctures and tears, and has a non-slip coating to minimize slip in transit and storage. Reclosable zippers provide needed convenience, while transparent film Titanium Clear allows for the incorporation of product view windows. Ten-color rotogravure photo-quality graphics on both the front and back of the bags complete packaging that will highlight a product on store shelves.

Mondi Americas' line of retort stand-up pouches for wet pet products also offers the option of high-definition flexographic or rotogravure printing to ensure high-quality, eye-catching brand presentation. The pouches, which are designed to provide protection of the food through high-barrier laminates, can be pre-made in a variety of shapes, making them ideal for snacks and treats. Single-serve formats provide convenience with their user-friendly, easy-tear designs.

"The premiumization of petfoods requires more premium packaging achieved through enhanced graphics and texture on the package," says Taylor. "Broader selection at retail calls for a more distinctive package design to differentiate."

Will the desires for convenience and customization remain strong in 2014? Yes, according to the packaging experts. "I would expect these trends to continue in 2014, with additional emphasis on packaging convenience and ways to differentiate products on store shelves," says Tupta.

New products will be introduced that continue to follow the overarching humanization trend, and the packaging industry will follow, according to Mondi Americas. "We believe that the push for food variety and meal occasions that replicate human habits will continue to promote new types of petfood," says Davis. "Because of the high cost of shelf space at retail, we believe most of these new products will be introduced in shelf-stable formats."

What's more, pet care companies and co-packers have already been investing in the equipment and infrastructure to support the transition to the new packaging formats, according to Staker. "The trend away from multi-wall paper bags and rigid containers to flexible plastic packaging will really accelerate in 2014 and beyond," he says. "The petfood market will see more packages that utilize the Velcro closure system as well as other new features aimed at enhancing the consumer experience (handles, fitments, spouts, etc.). In the smaller sizes of petfood, the industry will also begin seeing custom shapes, sizes and features aimed at drawing the consumer to the packaging.

"We've seen many product successes and failures throughout the years, and in many cases, it's the packaging that is really driving the perceived consumer value," says Staker. "We strongly encourage petfood companies to embrace new technology and innovation, not just for their products, but maybe more importantly, for their packaging."

More products: Stay up to date on the petfood industry's latest packaging products through our comprehensive products database at www.petfoodindustry.com/products.aspx.



Printpack US

In 2013, Printpack added quad-seal, large-format premade bags as an extension of their cups, stand-up pouch, rollstock and pinch bags to their line of products. In 2014, the company plans to add woven poly bags to its inventory.



Plastic Packaging Technologies LLC

Plastic Packaging Technologies will more than double its available flat-bottom “box pouch” and single-web quad bag capacity in 2014 to support the continuing trends towards these formats. Additionally, the company will be expanding its production of stand-up reclosable pre-made pouches to include various new fitments and closures, as well as shapes, to respond to evolving consumer demand.



Mold-Rite Plastics | Stull Technologies | Weatherchem

Mold-Rite Plastics | Stull Technologies | Weatherchem's new MegaFlap closure is ideal for pet snacks and treats, according to the company. Key features include a modern look with a large embossing area, flap-style dispensing, one-hand operation for ease of opening and closing, a positive snap upon reclosing, and a scoop retention area under the lid.



Flair Flexible Packaging Corporation

Flair Flexible Packaging's Titanium plastic packaging, an alternative to poly-woven multi-paper wall bags, can hold up to 50 pounds with resistance to punctures and tears, and has a non-slip coating to minimize slip in transit and storage. Other features include reclosable zippers, transparent film Titanium Clear for viewing window opportunities, and ten-color rotogravure photo-quality graphics on both the front and back of the bags.



Mondi Americas

In 2014, Mondri plans to leverage its position in the retort segment in Europe to introduce innovative new products into the US. Mondri also has plans to install a visual inspection system that will inspect 100% of all pouches against defects, according to the company.