



Toward a Simpler Coffee Packaging Future



Simple and stylish vented block bottom bags

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By Katrina Ávila Munichiello



Caffè Umbria Custom Bag 2012

How does a company make coffee packaging that stands out among an ever-increasing number of SKUs on the shelf? In the past, the answer was brighter colors, flashy graphics and slick package features. In 2014 there is a change in attitude. Packagers are exploring simple design elements that communicate a more rustic feel and an ongoing commitment to sustainability.

“There’s a wave that’s coming with specialty coffee people focused on creating a new experience in coffee,” says Pacific Bag c.e.o. Mark Howley. “They are using packaging as one of the mediums to convey that message.” This emerging approach in the coffee packaging sector will have an impact on design, structure and function.

Color and style

Looking strictly at color and style, packagers will lean more heavily toward earth tones. Printing will be matte, rather than glossy and the overall effect will be minimalist.

“What we’re seeing in the marketplace,” says Innovia Films market developer Neil Banerjee, “is a desire for more of an artisan, natural look and feel.” Coffee producers want packaging to reflect their brand image.

Flair Flexible Packaging is a company that is in the thick of this movement. Flair offers a wide variety of custom printing for coffee packaging as well as private labeling. Their program allows smaller companies to create bags with big design and small minimums.

One example of a unique product line they’ve assisted with is Nature’s Coffee Kettle. The package itself provides a way for people to brew gourmet coffee on the go and is designed for camping. Flair worked closely with the coffee company to come up with a package that reflected the client’s vision and provided the functionality needed by using full-coverage graphics, an integrated handle and pour spout, a built-in filter, and a design that stays cool enough to handle even when full of hot coffee. The finished package is more than a vessel to contain a product; its very design tells what the company values. Flair states that they “pride themselves on the ability to creatively offer solutions that fit individual products with consumers in mind.”

In a move toward environmental sensitivity, even printing will get a new look. Hot stamp printing transfers foil to packages, reducing the pollution of the printing process as it does not use inks or solvents. For those who prefer the look of ink, soy-based inks are gaining favor.

New shape

When looking at structural changes emerging in coffee packaging, the Block Bottom Bag has been an important addition to the market. Howley of Pacific Bag believes these packages have excellent advantages because they can square up on a shelf like a box, stand up cleanly with expansive panels for printing, and offer opportunities like zippers and other reclosure options, rather than traditional tin ties. Once again, they also send a message. Because it is a package that does not lend itself to automatic filling, it allows the smaller companies a way to distinguish themselves from the mega-packers. Block Bottom Bags will grow in usage, especially as better reclosure alternatives are developed, but for now cost is an important consideration. They run at about a 20% premium, depending upon the volume ordered.

Materials

Because sustainability is a goal of an increasing number of coffee companies, packagers are making strides with earth-friendly materials. Innovia Films has generated buzz with their triple-layer compostable packaging. Most flexible coffee packaging uses a three layer form: an exterior polypropylene film, an interior foil or metallized PET, and an interior polyethylene film. All of these materials are oil-based products.

Innovia has developed a product called NatureFlex™ that replaces some of these fossil-fuel based products with renewable versions that make use of hardwoods like eucalyptus to produce cellulose films. It is also GMO-free. A reverse printable film can be made for the outside and a robust bio-sealant layer can add the necessary protections inside. The middle layer is constructed from a metallized NatureFlex™. The triple layer packaging is compostable in industrial systems. If an organization is primarily working in foodservice situations where turnover is quick, a single film layer can be used and that product is certified for both home and industrial composting.

NatureFlex™ films were used to make packaging for South Africa's Caturra Coffee, which earned the "Certificate of Excellence - Most Innovative Product" at the Green Expo in Cape Town. Innovia



New Life for Coffee Capsules

Printpack's polypropylene coffee capsules are an innovation that begins to address concerns about the billions of spent capsules entering the waste stream. In the past, consumers have taken matters into their own hands, removing the foil caps, putting the grounds in their compost heaps, and washing and reusing the polystyrene cups. The hope of Printpack's global business development manager Dave Foster is that by moving toward polypropylene, the cups can be put into the recycling stream where they can find new life as toothbrush handles or park benches. If there is wide enough adoption and an FDA-approved system can be approved to keep the stream clean, there could even be a closed loop where the pods can be transformed into new capsules.

Nespresso uses an aluminum and plastic capsule to lock in the 900 aromas of its coffee. Members of the online Nespresso Club are encouraged to return spent capsules to the company's boutiques in major cities. Simply melting recovered fragments restores the properties of the original metal with very little energy. It takes only 5% of the energy required to extract the same quantity of metal, according to the company. Once recovered the metal is used to create casings for the company's PIXIE Nespresso machine.



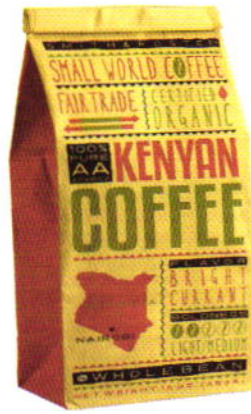
"There is no better way to walk the walk: the cute PIXIE machine, which was already energy efficient, is now a real-life illustration of the benefits of collecting capsules," according to the company.



Gorilla Coffee



Cuvee Coffee



SmallWorldCoffee



Stumptown Coffee

is currently working with partners to develop compostable button valves that would give the entire finished package greater recyclability. They are also exploring partnerships with specialty paper companies that offer greater flexibility in package look.

Pacific Bag has also garnered attention for materials by winning the Specialty Coffee Association of America's most innovative product award for its Biotrè™ film. Composed of 60% biodegradable materials, it offers a craft paper look but provides the barrier features required for packaging. A new version of Biotrè™ is in development currently that will improve sustainability further.

Other alternatives which may see increased use in traditional plastics are new oxo-biodegradable additives. EPI Environmental Technologies' Totally Degradable Plastic Additives® are added to resins and can increase the speed of degradation of the plastic when it is exposed to ultraviolet light and high temperatures.



Nature's Coffee Kettle pouch.

Coffee capsules

When aluminum and plastic capsules hit the market, they changed the conversation about what instant coffee could be. Last year consumers purchased 14 billion capsules, a number expected to double in three years.

Over the past decade roasters have been racing to keep up with growth, slowly adding tea to their coffee lines, but not changing much in the actual technology. The original capsules were made of polystyrene which creates problems with recyclability. However, as with all coffee packaging, there is a segment of the market who wants to see something more environmentally friendly. Once the patents expired, the race was on. In 2013, Printpack introduced a new alternative, a polypropylene capsule.

According to Dave Foster, global business development manager at Printpack, the polypropylene capsules are easier to recycle, create 30% less greenhouse gases, and have superior moisture and oxygen barrier compared to polystyrene. The biggest challenge is that polypropylene isn't readily punctured, a critical requirement for capsules. Printpack has overcome this obstacle and has created a product that is far more sustainable, with no cost penalty.

"We are seeing a tremendous amount of interest," says Foster. "Had the puncturability problem (of polypropylene) been solved ten years ago, we wouldn't be talking about polystyrene at all.

"Developing premium coffee packaging is no easy task. The coffee needs to be able to stay on the shelf for 12 to 24 months, protecting the beans from light, moisture and oxygen, while also being attractive enough to encourage consumers to buy. Over the next decade, the movement toward sustainable packaging will continue and costs will remain a major hurdle to adoption.

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