

Packaging Professionals and the Social Order

Why Members of Such an Essential Industry Get So Little Respect

By Neil Kozarsky

Want to know the level of recognition and respect packaging professionals, like myself, receive? Think about the last cocktail party you attended. The moment of truth comes when that most basic of all class-defining questions is asked. “So what do you do for a living?”

Oh to be able to say doctor, lawyer...even Indian chief. But no. Each time we say the word “packaging” it seems that most party guests sidestep toward that “must-have” appetizer across the room, or suddenly realize that their drinks need refilling.

And yet we know all too well how essential our role is in society. So who do we have to blame for this lack of esteem? I think a large amount of the responsibility rests on our own shoulders.

Not that we should grab people by the arm and say, “Wait, wait...imagine a world without packaging. What would a Kleenex be without a dispensing carton? How ready would Ready Whip be without the aerosol can?” What would a 6-Pack be without a 6-Pack?”

No, that would only make matters worse. What I am suggesting, however, is a collective look in the mirror, and then a coming together of the disparate forces within our industry that have been fragmented for too many years.

If the general public is to imagine a world without packaging, we have to imagine a packaging world united in its efforts to educate the general public.

Right now in the mind of the average consumer, there is no packaging industry. Many consumers merely believe that the product manufacturer is the one responsible for the product’s packaging. Many simply think of brown bags and boxes when they hear the word “packaging.” Even those with a little more manufacturing worldliness only put us packaging professionals into four major commodity groups: glass, metal, plastics and film.

One problem is the fact that there are no industry giants in packaging that serve to epitomize or represent the industry as a whole. Unlike aerospace, computing or retail, there is no Boeing, or Dell, or Nordstrom.

The second major problem contributing to the lack of understanding and respect is the fact that the industry makes no real effort to promote or explain itself. The industry has no single voice.

Sure we have trade associations. Good ones, too. But they each represent different segments of our industry. Instead of one voice, there are competing voices, each with its own message.

Yes, the Consumer Specialty Products Association (CSPA) has really beefed up its image and awareness efforts in the past years, but this association only represents a tiny portion of the packaging industry as a whole. Then there's the Institute of Packaging Professional (IoPP), the Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute (PMMI), the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association (CTFA), the Western Aerosol Information Bureau (WAIB), the Tube Council, the Society of Cosmetic Chemists (SCC), and on and on. Individually they do a great job of supporting membership interests. But when it comes to the image of the entire industry, it can be argued that the individualized messages do more harm than good.

It's not too far flung to compare our image dilemma with that of the boxing world. For better or worse, competing sanctioning bodies have just about dealt the boxing industry a self-inflicted knock out. Instead of one heavy weight champion, there's one for every organization.

Our problem is not one of self-destruction, however. It's just a matter of respect, and yes, ego. More than anything else, it's a matter of pride.

The truth is, I am very, very proud of "what I do for a living." And most of my friends and associates in this industry are equally proud. That's one reason why I still go to cocktail parties whenever the opportunity presents itself, and still look people right in the eye when I answer that self-defining question.

So let us imagine for a moment a world in which packaging has one voice. It is possible, you know. All it would take is the coming together of our current industry factions, with a single-minded purpose. And it will happen some day. It's simply up to you and me to make it happen sooner rather than later.

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