Packaging Assisted Euthanasia

by Michael B Halley FAIP

Back in the twelfth century packaging was very much an instrument of survival and the then Archbishop of Canterbury St Edmund of Abingdon is reported to have said *"study as if you were to live forever: live as if you were to die tomorrow".*

Nearly a millennium on the statement was prophetic when **Dean Crossthwaite** of **Orica Consumer Products** and **Wendy Bateman Manager RSL (Returned Services League) Aged and Health Support** addressed members of the Australian Institute of Packaging (AIP).

The two experts in their field gave an overview of the impact that packaging decisions can, and are, having on the longevity of the population. The body is a machine like none that humankind has invented but like a machine needs careful attention and proper 'nutrition'.

Dean Crossthwaite demonstrated with graphics and a fibreboard box the necessitates of package design and materials handling techniques to ensure that the workplace is safe and workers are not injured. The body consists of bones and muscles and other matter but for the purpose of our education muscles were mainly under focus. The body when used for manual materials handling of all types is a system of pulleys and levers and was graphically shown as a see-saw.

Muscle strength is in proportion to mass with the forearms being much more resilient than the shoulders but either can be damaged by incorrect work practices. The mid point through a contraction is when the muscle is strongest but many workers through ignorance or repetitious operations are doing irreversible damage to their body.

This is particularly so for the muscles in the lower back from where all the leverage comes when lifting. Picking packages from the floor and lifting above ones head is particularly hazardous. Mr Crossthwaite demonstrated that the oft held proper lift with the knees bent is not necessarily the best manoeuvre as the compression forces on the back joints are greater when the knees are bent.

He went onto discuss the methodology that can be used by Packaging Technologists in collaboration with Occupational Health and Safety experts to design the best package for what was described as the 95th% ie. Handles, tear tapes and all manner of handling or opening aids need to be considered in the overall context of the person who will be lifting or opening the package. An example was given where a shipment of 20litre drums imported from a country where the majority of the population have smaller hands had handles that the container unloaders could not fit into.

Aging reduces strength and force both in the clasping with a full hand or pinch grip with the thumb and forefinger. For consumer packaging it is important to understand the purchasing demographics. Females and aged persons are most likely to be the opener of packages and as the former, even at a young age, have less grip strength and the latter have diminished ability, it is futile to have young male testers determining if a seal or closure is user friendly.

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Dean Crossthwaite encouraged packaging designers to take professional advice from an OH&S specialist. He concluded with advice that an automatic page turner had been designed to assist infirm people to read books or magazines, which lead the convenor to 'turn the page' to **Wendy Bateman**.

Whilst the change over took place **Ian Fletcher FAIP (Life Member)** on behalf of the AIP Board advised that a decision had been taken to acknowledge longevities in the Association.

John Nickless, MAIP, is the Regional Account Manager at Innovia Films was the first Victorian to be awarded a 25 years of membership award and was initially taken aback but at meeting's end was back to his normal contributory self. So although his strength may have reduced, his aging has not diminished his involvement capabilities.

The use of visual aids was one plank of Wendy Bateman's podium supported by some very telling facts about how the lucky country treats the aging population. She gave an outstanding address on the reasons why we are at crisis point due to the burgeoning percentage the population being aged or infirm. Actuarial advice is that in 2011 one third of Australians (7 million) will be over fifty years of age with an eleven percent (11%) increase by 2050. Although we are living longer, a couple of periods of low replacement, means that there is no one coming up behind.

Ms Bateman reinforced the fact that as we age our bodies break down, but continued on to imply that the packaging industry is contributory to downstream effects upon the aged or infirm.

Each table had been supplied with 'reading glasses' that depicted three of the prolific eye diseases: -

- Macular Degeneration
- Cataracts
- Diabetic Retinopathy

Participants were given a portion pack of packaged cheese and were requested to put on a pair of glasses to get an understanding how a person with eye disease would 'see' the package. They were then asked to open the package whilst wearing the glasses. No poll was taken but many packages remained unopened.

What Wendy Bateman was on about was that aged care facilities and hospitals use similar portion packs to nourish inmates, but because of limited staff to help with feeding a lot of important food supplements are returned to the kitchen unopened.

And whilst the Packaging industry is involved it would seem unfair to sheet the blame entirely to it. Today human dignity is second place to the bottom line and the administrators of hospitals and care facilities work solely to a price per meal. Catering contracts are let by tender and the least price would generally get the gig. So do the caterers who determine the sustenance menus consider the packaging of processed food fed direct at meal times by persons again working to a price?

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But it behoves Brand Owners to be cognisant of the issues that packages designed for optimum shelf appeal can have on consumers particularly the aged and infirm. Malnutrition is a serious concern in hospitals, which can result in many additional illnesses but a startling statistic offered by Wendy was that forty percent (40%) of people admitted are undernourished. Some of this may be contingent upon hard to open packages in the home.

Again there are other contenders for 'the sucker punch' but other factors beside opening difficulty are in Packaging's corner. Sensory perception diminishes, and as many as 80% of those 60 years of age and over will show signs of arthritis. Reflective graphics on packages can cause problems for those with cataracts and packages too large for weakened hands to hold are a problem.

Even supplements such as vitamins or prescribed medicines have tamper evident closures but in the latter these are mandatory as are the ever increasing warnings and content data that often override the packaging designers ability to cater for aged consumers needs.

We are all going to die and before that if we live toward the four score and seven years we will find that if all men are created equal they do not end up that way. Government of the people, by the people, for the people, also mentioned in the Gettysburg Address has also been significantly malnourished.

So 'study as if you were to live forever' seems an appropriate mission statement for all involved in putting food on the table. If your task is to design packages be brave enough to take on the marketers and say 'what about me dear old mum'.

Ralph Moyle conducted a spirited question and answer session that stretched the aging audience beyond their bedtimes, but all were well nourished by the information supplied by the guest presenters. A small token of appreciation was given to a round of applause.

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Australian Institute of Packaging
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