

The true role of packaging comes to light in the midst of the COVID-19

The Australian Institute of Packaging executive director Nerida Kelton talks to experts about packaging's role in a COVID-19 world.

In the haze of pandemic conversations swirling around everyone's heads, one topic that has global significance is food security and integrity. The Australian Institute of Packaging (AIP) invited experts from different areas of the packaging industry to provide their views on the important role that packaging plays in times like these.

In part one of this two-part feature, Michael Dossor MAIP, group general manager, Result Group; Dr Carol Kilcullen-Lawrence, FAIP, CPP sustainability specialist, UPM Raflatac; Alan Adams MAIP, sustainability director APAC, Sealed Air; Professor Pierre Pienaar FAIP, CPP, education director – Australian Institute of Packaging (AIP) and president – World Packaging Organisation (WPO); and Keith Chessell FAIP, APCO board member all bring different views to this discussion on COVID-19 and how it will affect the packaging industry.

With the world turned upside down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are now realising that packaging plays an integral role in food safety. Do you think that this pandemic might help show packaging for its true purpose and perhaps even in a different light from recent times?

Michael Dossor: One hundred per cent it will, particularly in fresh produce. Although a lot of information about unpackaged produce – fruit and vegetables specifically – has been published and research has shown it not to be impacted, a consumer being faced with a choice of packed or unpacked is subconsciously selecting packaged products. The responsibility we have as an industry is to ensure

we are still doing all we can to make sure this packaging fits with APCO goals for a circular economy. There are many ways to develop packaging in this space that can go to kerbside collection. I hope as an industry, we use this time to keep that a primary focus. The industry, brand owners and major retailers have an even greater responsibility right now.


Carol Kilcullen-Lawrence: The essential aspect of food packaging is really in the spotlight – shoppers are seeking to ensure that the food they purchase is less likely to have come into contact with COVID-19 and a protective layer of packaging is now desirable compared to loose produce that has been handled. While I believe this shift of focus from so called “excessive packaging” to “essential packaging” is understandable, we should not lose sight of the opportunity to engage with the consumer and the instructions supplied by the Australasian Recycling Label are doing just that.

Alan Adams: Yes, safety and availability are now primary concerns which is a different focus on packaging from a consumer's perspective than of late. With COVID we believe that most consumers are looking at the retail shopping experience with a new focus on food safety. Contamination, handling in store, protection during transit and the unwrapping, safety of products arriving at home are all now being considered when in the past many consumers took these for granted. These concerns previously did not form part of the decision-making process for so many. Hermetically sealed packaging is now extremely attractive, plastics that enables us to see products but protects them from

contamination are now attractive. The safety of reusable containers and bags is now in question. Placing the onus on cleanliness and eliminating contamination in the hands of consumers will deliver varying levels of safety. Efficient and effective packaging delivering products safely – the primary role of packaging – is back in focus.

Pierre Pienaar: Indeed, we have been turned upside down. I await with interest to see how the impact of the pandemic will change or influence the food buying habits of consumers. Consumers' needs have always driven the look of food packaging. The battle in the immediate future will be between extended shelf-life items and fresh produce; with fresh produce perceived as proving a threat to the consumers' health. Yes, consumers will expect safe food packaging. Whether their attitude towards the status of packaging being the “bad boy” changes or now, I am not convinced. I am hoping the pandemic, as well as ongoing education, will bring about a greater sense of responsibility within consumers for their own actions. In many countries around the world, and probably more in developed countries, we are seeing an uptake in meal kit subscription and home delivery services. Some countries tell me this service is busier than ever; leading to increased employment opportunities and greater demand for packaging that can cope with such a service.

Keith Chessell: Consumers have certainly become very aware during the COVID pandemic of the range of health issues around hand washing, cleaning surfaces and close contact with people. This awareness has



Consumers want food packaging that offers integrity and safety.

changed consumers thinking about their view of packaging and especially the plastics packaging, especially when it comes to food purchasing decisions. Everyday COVID requirement changes have accelerated this understanding, like reusable coffee cups reverting to single-use cups, single-use bags replacing reusable shopping bags and the enormous quantity of single-use items of gloves, masks, clothing that are used once and then disposed (where and how hasn't been disclosed by the authorities). Although I am sure consumers understand the important role that packaging plays in protecting and preserving the freshness of the food products from the farm, through manufacturing/processing plants, to the store and to kitchen cupboard/refrigerator, the environment concerns have been pushing that understanding into the back of the minds. Will this changed attitude revert when we return to “normal” or “new normal”? I believe this will very much depend on ensuring future packaging design assists the consumer to recognise the protecting and preserving benefits and also assist them to know there are recycling, reuse options that will reduce and hopefully eliminate packaging ending up in the rubbish bin.

How important is the role that packaging plays in food safety and food integrity?

Dossor: Packaging plays a massive role; not only in food safety and



food integrity, but more so in food waste. Consumers are looking to minimise their trips to retail outlets for obvious reasons. Giving them a package that enables both food safety and integrity, as well as functions like reseal or reclose with tamper evidence and less plastic, is where we at Result are focusing our energies. These style solutions are available right now, they don't require large capital investment and tick all these boxes - as well as fit within APCO guidelines.

Kilcullen-Lawrence: Packaging plays a hugely important role in food safety and integrity. In the current climate however, I am still cautious about the virus potentially being on the surface of the packaging, particularly as it has been shown that it can survive for several days on non-porous surfaces. I have been combating this risk in a number of ways, including discarding some outer packaging layers before putting food in the pantry or fridge.

Adams: Vital! Packaging is the vehicle that ensures the consumer receives the product in the manner in which the producer intended. The core function of packaging is to protect and preserve product and to prevent damage of all types - including physical, contamination or interference. Packaging also plays a key role in authenticity. Take vacuum

packaged meat as an example; the packaging is vital to ensure the safe and quality eating experience is delivered. Products like Darfresh vacuum packaging seals the meat in with intimate contact delivering extended shelf life by as much as 28 days, prevents any contamination and still allows the customer to "feel" and see the meat.

Pienaar: It would appear that Covid-19 will be directly affecting each of us positively or negatively, or both, for at least the next six to 12 months, if not much longer. What we may need to focus on is the packaging of fresh foods for supermarkets. Consumers will become sceptical about any food not wrapped, especially foods where the skin is usually consumed, such as fruit and vegetables. Packaging remains integral in the delivery of safe food. The so-called "Farmers Market" concept may suffer somewhat, initially, until they too take on board the safety element that packaging offers the consumer. Our challenge will be to strike the balance between possible additional packaging requirements in response to the impact of the pandemic while still considering the sustainable, demands from the same consumer.

Chessell: As mentioned previously, packaging has a critical role in protecting and preserving the

quality, freshness of the food products from the farm through every stage to the consumer. But packaging is also recognised today for the important benefits it provides of extending shelf life, reducing food spoilage and waste. It provides important information on ingredient, nutritional, storage and recipes, as well as the convenience (portion control, easy opening, ready meals) that consumers are now requiring.

The packaging industry is playing such an important role at the moment during this pandemic. What changes are you seeing to the industry? Are you seeing shortage in materials and packaging? What else can be done to help the industry at this moment?

Dossor: Short answers is yes, increased volumes at a retail level with classic food service products being in such massive demand based on isolation closures. Having partners companies in Germany, Spain, UK and North America, Result Group is keeping close to see the trends it is facing. Typically, what is happening overseas is also happening in Australia. Lead times are being pushed out, as order in volumes are upwards of 200 per cent. Our challenge is to maintain supply of products with increased volumes for all retail based FMCG on the up. Result's approach has been to increase our volume holding as quickly as possible to ensure we support our customers. We cannot let customers down and that has meant additional investment in stock which is critical to the success of the current state of our supply chains in Australia.

Kilcullen-Lawrence: The importance of securing supply chains is critical as we navigate through the increased demand for packaging. Packaging that is manufactured in Australia has been desirable, to ramp up production to keep supermarket shelves topped up. I am noticing that panic buying is still a problem for some food lines.

Adams: The big impacts are staff safety and site security along with managing surge demand. Security of supply has risen sharply as a key concern up and down the supply chain. Having Australian production sites and international operations Sealed Air has managed very well keeping up supply even when demand for some

lines jumped by more than 200 per cent. We have implemented a "Fortress mentality" at our production sites. We have put in place a range of measures to protect our staff and sites and there is a strong feeling of sense of duty to support the food and e-commerce industries who rely on us. There is a great feeling throughout the whole supply chain that we pull together in this time of crisis.

Pienaar: More than ever, packaging is playing an important role in the industry. Across the world, I am being told that all the essential related aspects of industry are busier than ever, packaging being one. Both in flexible and rigid plastics, factories are running 24/7 producing packaging components of some sort. One factory in India told me that they have no capacity for any development work as all hands are on deck producing around the clock. At this stage, customers of the converting industry can help by not placing orders for non-essential goods, until they can get on top of the demand. We, the end customer, need to understand and accept the status for now.

Chessell: It has been amazing to see the innovation and initiatives that many companies have undertaken to change production facilities to meet the additional medical and cleansing demands required to meet COVID requirements. Materials and packaging shortages have been initially impacted due to panic buying. It has been impressive to see the rapid response by producers and manufacturers to rapidly respond to this demand. Manufacturers and producers who are sourcing the packaging raw materials from overseas, have been immediately impacted by China's shutdown and then the flow on to countries around the world plus the closing down of most international transport arrangements.

The federal and state government support of our manufacturing industry has been an important step in keeping industry working and enabling the restarting of those impact industries after COVID. This includes the support programs via the JobKeeper Payment, assistance with energy bills, mandatory code of conduct for commercial tenancies to support small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and International Freight Assistance Mechanism. **F**

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In part two of how COVID-19 has impacted on the packaging industry, The Australian Institute of Packaging executive director Nerida Kelton talks to the experts about packaging's role in a pandemic world.

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One outcome from the current situation is the resurgence of single-use plastics. How can we manage this as an industry?

Michael Dossor: This is the most important question of all. There are ways to protect the product, while at the same time ensure materials will fit within APCO's circular economy model and we have done it many times over at Result. The term single use package does need to be used as much as it is and with the correct solution, brand owners can put that claim on pack. The question is: will they? The consumer knowing there are recycling options has become as important as claims on the product itself in my opinion.

Carol Kilcullen-Lawrence: Single use plastic for food packaging is not likely to be replaced any time soon. So, its management is about providing suitable convenient recycling options – these will continue to evolve as Australia moves towards more local recycling as part of the APCO projects that steer us towards meeting the 2025 National Packaging Targets.

Alan Adams: Single-use plastics is a widely used term that is perhaps better used with the term 'problematic' as APCO recommends. As an industry, the needs for recovery and better use of resources in plastics at end of life has not changed, work is continuing to generate better outcomes. Sealed Air continues towards our pledge of being 100 per cent recyclable by 2025 and including 50 per cent recycled content. Recently, we launched plastic mailers with recycled content made from waste generated in our food packaging plants and waste from post-consumer streams. The resurgence of single-use plastics is more about increased understanding of safety, security, and the supply chain performance of high-performance plastics.

Pierre Pienaar: The same consumers, who have been demanding governments ban single-use bags and who have been leading the uptake in the keep-cup concept, are the ones shouting for shoppers to leave their reusable bags and keep-cups at home. It is called survival. WPO is hopeful, with the entire planet, that this pandemic will pass, and life will settle back into a pattern we enjoyed prior to the pandemic outbreak. I am hoping the resultant and overriding attitude in response to these forms of packaging will be a sense of how much the consumer has been directly responsible for our polluted planet to date.

Keith Chessell: Most states have in place or are working on implementing a single use plastic ban covering items such as lightweight plastic shopping bags, disposable plastic plates/bowls, cutlery, cups, stirrers and some other single-use food service items, expanded polystyrene food and beverage containers, plastic straws,

heavier/boutique plastic bags and oxo-degradable plastics. Although attitudes may have changed through this COVID crisis, the phasing out of these items will certainly occur. The packaging and manufacturing industry need to get on board with the 2025 National Packaging Targets and become APCO members and utilise their resources (PREP recycling tool, Australasian Recycling Logo), the recently issued Sustainable Packaging Guidelines (SPGs) plus a ranging of packaging material guides. The industry has been on the back foot for far too long with Australian consumers with regards to plastic packaging. We have failed to defend and support the important role that packaging has in protecting, preserving, extending shelf life, reducing food spoilage and waste, providing important information on ingredients, nutrition, storage and recipes as well as the convenience that consumers require. The industry right now must ensure their packaging meets the sustainable packaging guidelines – recyclable or reusable, is working towards recycled content and has the ARL for the consumer's disposal understanding.

There have been growing concerns that with the world in one form of lockdown or other consumers are no longer caring about the environment as much and are not recycling. There have also been many photos on the Internet showing all of the medical PPE being littered around the world. What should be done to ensure that we maintain the course for recycling globally?

Michael: The answer is simple. The industry has the capabilities to develop a packaging material of any

type to fit the circular economy and be 100 per cent recycled, be made from recycled content but at the end of the day the consumer still has to put the packaging in the right bin or dispose of it correctly. I am pretty sure our Prime Minister said it best when people started panic buying toilet paper. "It is wrong, stop doing it, it is un-Australian". The same applies for PPE littering.

Carol: Even though our short-term focus has necessarily shifted towards "physical distancing" we also have an opportunity now to think about what is truly important and there is definitely an emerging sense of community. The measures we are taking are for the benefit of everyone. So, when we switch back to our





longer-term goals, I believe protection of our environment will still rank highly. The problem of medical equipment being littered is a difficult one. I have come across used gloves being left in a shopping trolley. Also, there are so many people wearing masks incorrectly. We need more government guidance about when PPE is actually recommended. Gloves are not a substitute for good hand hygiene and masks worn for too long harbour many germs.

Alan: The vast majority of consumer recycling is done at home and this service continues without interruption. In fact, with more time at home, less travel and less dining out and fast food consumption it is highly likely that traditional litter rates are dropping and recycling rates increasing. The improper disposal of Medical PPE is similar to other forms of littering; poor choices by individuals or organisations. Pressure to deliver on 2025 recycling targets in Australia and globally remain in place. While changing behaviour is part education, there are always that small percentage that are inconsiderate of others and the environment. It is pleasing to see law enforcement taking action on those making poor choices including elevated and specific fines for littering PPE.

Pierre: Survival always remains

our most essential need, hence the current medical PPE littering. I am of the opinion that this pandemic will ultimately bring the opposite effect. I am hoping that after this pandemic, and as a result of self-isolation, we may have greater appreciation for our cleaner planet and for our family, friends and neighbours. This pandemic is a leveller like no other we have seen in living history. We are dependent on our earth, on our family and our neighbours. Nobody is the centre of the universe. Hopefully it takes being alone to appreciate the need for us to work together.

Keith: There has been little said around the world about the disposal of medical PPE. The current littering pictures that are being circulated of PPE gloves and masks really don't assist consumers' perspectives about packaging, litter, ocean and planet contamination.

Up until the COVID-19 impact, consumers were concerned for the environment, climate change, recycling and there was negativity towards plastic packaging. The improved understanding of packaging by consumers through the protection benefits during this COVID period will be quickly lost unless each industry addresses the environmental design requirements for their products and educates the consuming public for the reason/benefits their packaging

provides to the food and beverage products.

How do you think packaging will be perceived after this is all over?

Michael: As an industry, if we keep doing the great work we have been undertaking, then packaging has an opportunity to have its recent perceptions changed at a consumer level. It is all about the consumer facing communication and education. We need to continue to showing and explain all of the great work that is being done within the packaging industry. Packaging has a role to play that is far greater than just protecting the product. Controlling and minimising food waste stands out and that is a bigger problem than the packaging itself, costing the country more in the longer term.

Carol: I hope the importance of packaging will be appreciated, particularly its role in preserving food. And as brands continue on a journey towards more sustainable packaging, we have a huge opportunity to take consumers with us on this journey.

Alan: The value and types of packaging will have changed. E-commerce and home delivery will remain, with higher adoption so efficient and effective protective packaging is needed. New packaging

formats are accelerating like TempGuard, a recyclable fibre solution that extends the operating window for chilled food home delivery. Cooking at home rates have changed as new cooks are created so packaging making cooking and preparation accessible will be valued. We are seeing a spike in demand for ready meals in packaging like Simple Steps. Food safety, security of supply and damage protection will not be taken for granted.

Pierre: A realisation that it is every country's culture that is directly responsible for how much pollution they are causing. It is not the fault of packaging. Japan's culture is currently proving its saving grace in this pandemic. With a population two and three times that of Italy and Spain respectively, Japan's hygiene culture of no handshaking (rather bowing), wearing of masks, respect of social distancing etc. has managed to keep its COVID-9 numbers relatively low. Japan's culture too demands extravagant packaging of all goods, to the point of over packaging and single food item packaging. Packaging in Japan is considered a necessary luxury. They have almost a fetish with packaging for a number of cultural reasons. Re-use of items such as plastic chopsticks (as opposed to disposable wooden ones) and cloth napkins is unheard of. In response to this, however, they are among the world's foremost recyclers. Over 70 per cent of Japan's plastic is recycled. Lower than 20 per cent is sent to landfill in comparison with the US landfill figure of around 70 per cent of plastic. A culture shift may be required by many countries as they realise – after the pandemic – how much they were to blame for the Earth's demise. The WPO through its member countries like the AIP, is intent on working with countries to educate consumers to manage pollution themselves rather than depend on a government to dictate behaviour.

Keith: As we look back on the COVID experience, I am sure as a packaging and manufacturing industry we will be able to see we have been thrown a 'lifeline' to restore in the consumer's mind that packaging is not evil, it does serve a critical purpose and is an essential part of providing food safety and integrity to our consumer products. **F**



Packaging has a huge role to play in a pandemic world especially in terms of preserving food and beverages.