

Sliding towards the mainstream

The slider zipper is becoming a more popular packaging choice for developers of sliced meats and cheese, but conversion costs still limit its appeal. **By Richard Mitchell, Editor**

Developers of packaging for meat and deli products are doing their part to make the containers more functional and user-friendly. The development of the slider zipper, for instance, enables consumers to more easily open and seal bags holding meats and cheese by moving a small plastic peg along the length of the container's zipper.

The enhancement helps to insure that the foods remain fresh, and it eliminates the challenge many persons—particularly older consumers—face in properly fastening the push-to-close tracks at the top of the package. Yet, getting many food manufacturers to embrace the technology is proving to be difficult.

While Lake Forest, IL-based Pactiv Corp.'s *Slide-Rite* slider zipper is attached to such products as Horsham, PA-based Perdue Farms' fully cooked Bourbon Chicken, and East Brunswick, NJ-based Plumrose USA is using the *Zip-Pak* slider from Manteno, IL-based Zip-Pak for its 8-ounce line of *Danola Supreme* Deli Classic meats, the vast majority of meat, poultry, and cheese items still contain press-to-close closures or other traditional components. In many cases, suppliers are reluctant to invest in the newer technologies needed for the packaging upgrades, analysts say.

A pricey option

Huston Keith, principal at Keymark Associates, a Marietta, GA-based packaging consulting firm, says it costs about 2 to 3 cents to add a zipper to a bag, and several additional cents to attach a slider.

Keith Heyen, North American sales and marketing manager for Pactiv's Hefty Slide-Rite Products, estimates that it can cost up to \$600,000 for product manufacturers to install or upgrade their machines to support the slider.

"A regular zipper comes in a long coil and just has to be cut at the appropriate length," Keith notes. "But to add the slider, companies would need machinery that inserts the tab, and that is a

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challenge." He adds that while it might cost 5 cents for suppliers to add a slider to a package, markups likely would add 10 cents to the retail price of the product.

Though focus group tests reveal that customers love the concept of the slider zipper, many processors and retailers also mistakenly believe they would not be interested in subsidizing the feature, says Mona Doyle, president of The Consumer Network Inc., a Philadelphia-based food and packaging consumer research firm.

"Most companies don't use the slider for a very good reason—it costs significantly more," Doyle notes. "But all our studies show that consumers are willing to pay for a more convenient package. There are many shoppers who will not buy cheese and other items because the containers are too hard to access."

Easy-open packaging is most important to persons 45 and older who may have problems with dexterity, she adds. "Kids and people in their 20s just tear everything apart, but when you get to the 40-plus group there are more issues,"



Doyle says. "Slider zippers get very high marks from shoppers as being consumer-friendly, whereas many persons have come to hate press-to-close zippers because their fingers don't work well with the design. Some consumers are down on the zipper packages that only two or three years ago they were thrilled about."

Product upgrades

While sliders are slow to gain acceptance in the mass market, manufacturers still are focused on improving the technology. Pactiv, for instance, recently began encapsulating its slider within the package for added product safety. Users now must tear off the film on top of the bag to reach the tab. The vendor also is implementing a smaller slider that is designed to operate more efficiently, Heyen notes.

Meanwhile, Zip-Pak added an improved tamper-evident seal to its designs, and developed a sealant layer on its zipper that will attach to a wider range of films, says Bob Hogan, Zip-Pak director of sales and marketing.

Hogan says the slider is "at the beginning of its lifecycle," and predicts that it will be a couple of years before many companies modify their machines to support the technology. "It takes time to fabricate the equipment

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and then to convert it for use with the slider," he notes.

"Suppliers also need to change the graphics on their films to highlight the new slider. But it's definitely going to happen."

In the meantime, Zip-Pak is designing new resins and joining with equipment companies to develop machines that sustain the slider, he adds.

Yet, as slider developers work to enhance their designs, other forms of packaging are growing in popularity. More food producers, for instance, are selling sliced meats in plastic tubs. The rigid, lidded containers typically hold an inner package of meats and are being used to market both private-label and national brands.

An attractive alternative

Doyle says firms are positioning the tub as a reusable alternative to the throwaway zipper. "Tubs are easier to seal than the press-to-close zipper, and there is a merchandising advantage because they appear to have more heft than the little zipper pouch," she notes. "Some tubs might not actually be reusable because the plastic is so thin, but they have become commonplace with takeout foods and generate a message of convenience."

While Keith says a tub can cost several times more than a slider zipper package, he notes that buyers of tub products may still feel they are getting a bargain if the added expense for buying food in the container is less than the cost of purchasing a clear, empty plastic tub from a store. "I'd be surprised if at least twenty-five percent of premium deli thin-sliced meats were not being sold in tubs," he notes.

But because tubs take up more space in the refrigerator and the graphics are not as pronounced as those on a pouch, Heyen says the tub also faces acceptance issues. Pactiv markets tubs



in addition to slider zippers.

"Companies going for tubs have to recapitalize their production lines and change their processes so they are able to fill the tubs with vacuum-type products," he notes. "They also have to add a label for tamper evidence and put a belly band around the container. It is an expensive process, but the tub is getting a lot of play because it offers easy reclosability."

Heyen adds that most packaging improvements start with premium products, a category in which consumers are more likely to pay for upgrades.

"As the premium sector grows, sliders and tubs will play an increasingly bigger role," he predicts. **MDR**