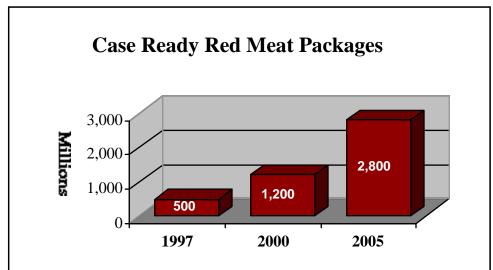
Column for Flexible Packaging magazine, August, 2001

Targeting New Markets

GET READY FOR CASE READY

• by Huston Keith • • • • • • • • •

In March, Flexible Packaging highlighted great growth in case ready red meat packaging. Now a new study from Packaging Strategies called *Case Ready Meat Packaging* shows that this market offers even bigger opportunities for converters. Sales of flexible packaging materials are expected to exceed \$125 million by 2005, and could easily be double or triple that amount within 10 years. In 2000, 1.2 billion case ready packages were sold, more than double from 1997. But 2005, the package count is expected to more than double again to 2.8 billion. Yet this is less than a third of the total potential market of 9 billion packages, hinting that growth could be even faster.



Believe it or not, nearly all retailers now offer some form of case ready product. Most often, it is the ubiquitous ground beef chub, made from opaque printed laminated barrier films. While still significant, it is declining as newer case ready packages become more popular. Many retailers also carry vacuum packaged marinated boneless pork loins or ribs, which typically use coextruded forming and lidding barrier films. Large retailers such as Kroger, Wal-Mart, Albertson's and many others all have a significant case ready programs across a full range of products.

What is driving this growth surge? Overwhelmingly, retailers active in case ready say they need it to keep meat on display. Overheated job markets in many cities have made it impossible to keep meat departments adequately staffed, muting the often-strident labor opposition in years past. Retailers also want to reduce liability for food safety by eliminating in-store red meat processing.

Ironically, the highly touted cost savings projected for case ready programs are elusive, claim many retailers, although many also admit current costing systems are inadequate to pinpoint savings. Furthermore, most stores still have a limited participation in case ready, thus it is difficult for both retailers and processors to achieve economies of scale needed to generate significant cost savings.

What is case ready red meat packaging? What other packages are used for it? Simply, is it is any product to that arrives at a retail store ready to put directly into the display case without any handling other than perhaps adding a price label. Two basic types of packages are used: a polystyrene foam tray overwrapped with stretch or shrink film and a modified atmosphere lid sealed barrier tray. The former is more popular because it is like the package now used at most supermarkets. However, it is expected to be surpassed by the barrier tray in a few short years because the latter is leakproof, provides longer shelf life and can be packaged at higher production rates.

What are the major opportunities for flexible packaging converters? The largest by far is for gas barrier films, especially clear antifog lidding to seal to barrier trays. Another significant market is for coextruded sealant films to laminate to foam or plastic trays to provide barrier. Also coextruded films are used to make masterpack bags. These bags are used to line shipping cases. Processors pack overwrapped trays into these bags, then evacuate and gas flush the bag to provide extended shelf life for distribution. There are also opportunities for permeable stretch or shrink films, especially those that tend to resist shipping and abuse.

What about graphics? Currently the need for printed films is small but expected to grow dramatically. Most products use pressure-sensitive labels for two reasons: low-volume for specific products and, more importantly, retailer reluctance to purchase branded products. Since fresh red meat has historically been a key differentiator for retailers, they resist buying branded red meat that could also be at their competitors' nearby. However, Wal-Mart is bucking this trend by purchasing branded meats from IBP, Smithfield and others, although graphics are far more subdued than is typical of processed meats and other branded products. As case ready becomes more commonplace, resistance to branding and graphics is likely to decline.

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While the opportunity is large and growing, converters need to get ready if they want to participate. Not only are the films complex, packaging of highly perishable fresh meats is very demanding.

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