Why corrugated shipping containers are the best bet for growers, retailers and the planet

BY DAVID ANDREWS

We often take it for granted that whenever we open up a box or a carton, its contents will be in perfect pristine condition. We seldom think of the technology and design efforts incorporated into that box to ensure protection of the goods inside from damage, but that does not mean that there’s much more to the humble box than meets the eye—especially when it comes to reliable food packaging.

According to a recent study analyzing a shipment of strawberries, both growers and retailers ultimately lose out when relying on reusable plastic containers (RPCs) to transport their shipments instead of corrugated cases.

The study, sponsored by the U.S.-based Corrugated Packaging Alliance, traced all the steps involved in the shipment of 144 million pounds of strawberries over a distance of some 3,900 kilometers. According to the study’s results, using corrugated containers cost 13 per cent less than shipping the same volume in RPCs—yielding annual savings of US$6.6 million.

In large part, the higher costs incurred in using RPC systems are related to the required back-haul trip for the RPCs, which also involves washing costs and various handling fees.

Long Haul

For their part, corrugated container do not require back-hauling because they can be recovered for recycling right after their use at the retail locations—lowering the retailers’ environmental impact and waste disposal costs in the process.

In fact, old corrugated containers (OCCs) are a valuable commodity for which Canadian retailers can fetch up to $100 per tonne from the recyclers.

Naturally, these cost-savings are not limited to just strawberries.

A similar case study, also published by the Corrugated Packaging Alliance, demonstrated a 25-percent annual cost-savings in shipping tomatoes in corrugated cases compared to the same volume of tomatoes shipped in RPCs, with detailed analysis revealing the RPCs to incur extra trucking and handling costs of US$7.5 million.

Even when using a conservative estimate of US$0.10 per container, washing alone adds US$577,000 to the annual cost of using RPCs to transport tomatoes.

The two studies confirm that while RPCs may initially seem like an efficient shipping option, all the extra steps and processes their usage incurs throughout the supply chain—back-hauling, washing, tracking, stacking, etc.—can add significant costs to the suppliers, customers and, ultimately, the consumers. (Both case studies are available online at www.cccabox.org/news.php)

Fruit and vegetable growers have a clear understanding of the value proposition of corrugated packaging versus RPCs, notes Mike Harwood, president and chief executive officer of the World Containerboard Organisation (WCO) in Brussels, Belgium.

“Growers know the true cost of packaging because any cost directly impacts their bottom line, Harwood states. “The growers I speak with make it a point to look at all aspects of the cost equation and they choose corrugated over RPCs every time.”

Not only is corrugated containerboard packaging a viable solution for retailers aiming to maximize efficiency and minimize costs, Harwood explains, it also offers inherent flexibility because corrugated is entirely customizable to specific application needs.

Harwood explains that corrugated boxes can be die-cut and folded into an infinite variety of shapes and sizes to fit specific product protection, shelf-space and shipping density requirements.

Moreover, moisture barriers and water repellency coatings can be added to protect contents when required, and there are many available choices of flute size and board type that can be selected based on strength requirements of specific applications.

More than just a transport vehicle, the corrugated package also serves as an effective billboard for brand identification, since corrugated material can be printed with high-impact graphic designs to maximize shelf appeal—making it a valuable marketing tool.

Nowadays there is a multitude of available printing alternatives—ranging from budget-conscious direct print flexography to elaborate litho labeling and pre-print—to provide buyers with multiple graphic options.

“Produce growers are very articulate about the value corrugated brings to their business in terms of packing and shipping, and they definitely appreciate the branding and advertising capabilities,” Harwood points out.

By virtue of being made from a renewable resource—namely recovered corrugated boxes—corrugated containers also boast an immensely positive environmental profile, according to industry insiders.

“Most of the corrugated boxes made in Canada are 100-percent recycled content,” states John Mullinder, executive director of the Paper & Paperboard Packaging Environmental Council (PPEC) in Brampton, Ont.

Other Uses

“Most corrugated packaging, about 85 per cent, is recovered from the back of supermarkets and factories, as well as from curbside Blue Box Systems,” Mullinder says. “Moreover, these recovered boxes are also suitable for composting and for use in the manufacturing of fire-logs.”

For his part, Harwood points out that produce growers themselves are well aware of the importance and benefits of using renewable resources, like paper, in the packaging process.

“Growers overwhelmingly appreciate the value and the relative scarcity of water resources—especially those in the drought-stricken ‘Farm Belt’ regions where any available water resources are also needed to grow the crops themselves,” Harwood says.

“So using those limited water resources for repeated cleaning of dirty RPCs is by definition a counterproductive activity for them.”

As the aforementioned Corrugated Packaging Alliance studies illustrate, there is indeed far more to corrugated packaging than meets the eye.

It is important for growers and retailers to consider cost factors throughout the entire supply chain, and the wide-ranging benefits of using paper-based packaging throughout that chain.

For the highly competitive and cost-conscious corrugated containerboard industry, offering produce growers excellent value with versatile and economical transport packaging options is ultimately a win-win proposition not only for the businesses involved, but for the greater social good as well. ✦

David Andrews is executive director of the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association (CCCA) in Brampton, Ont. For information on CCCA activities, please go to www.cccabox.org

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