



# Broader skill sets: the new face of the packaging professional?

By Jim George



Mike Marcinkowski, a packaging engineer at Gillette, explained in a recent IoPP webinar how the company reduced the packaging structures for its Venus brand of women's razors from nine to two. Gillette is striving to simplify where possible among its 1,500 skus, not only to curtail costs but also to ease consumer understanding of the various Venus products.

While hearing about this success story, it's easy to also think about the many companies struggling to achieve lean measures with broad impact. Why is this so? Contributing factors range from regulatory mandates to supply chain and internal operation obstacles. A recent informal IoPP member poll sheds additional light on one challenge at consumer goods companies: Though they're carefully applying marketplace research to package development, many have not assessed where and how their packages might affect their operations and the bottom line. Our poll, though unscientific and small in sample size, does suggest a revealing snapshot of inadequate communication and understanding between packaging functions.

Why does this disconnect exist more often than we might realize? "The Manufacturing Workforce Development Playbook," recently published by Summit Media Group, as well as anecdotal evidence IoPP has picked up from packaging professionals, identifies a pervasive skills gap as one significant reason. Hiring managers at several global consumer product companies tell me they are looking for skilled professionals who are inquisitive, show initiative, and can think beyond just knowing about materials science and other singular aspects of packaging. They want people who can take a holistic view and consider the ramifications of their decisions elsewhere in their company.

Marcinkowski, in his webinar, laid out an excellent example of the results when this is done well. In reducing its inventory of packaging structures for Venus, Gillette eliminated PVC packs. That's 1.4 million lbs. of PVC annually. Moreover, a cross-functional team that dared to ask why across the package development process and beyond came to understand the "big picture." Changes were made that produced not only a better package for consumers but also brought about a major reduction in plastic weight and, by extension, desired transportation

cost savings. These are changes that improve consumer experiences with the brand and support overall business objectives at Procter & Gamble/Gillette, he explained.

Surely there are more untold success stories, but it's human nature that we lament more often about the struggles. Even so, some packaging team leaders are beginning to ask important questions, such as: Could it be that we are not walking in each other's shoes enough? Do we need to be spending more time understanding and building sturdier bridges with other functions that work with packaging? What can we do differently to assure that every function packaging touches is optimized and sustainable, from end to end? Along the way, can we uncover and exploit innovation gaps?

While these questions are being asked, there also is acknowledgment of the unfilled holes on packaging teams. At IoPP, we often hear from companies seeking referrals for experienced packaging engineers. There aren't enough to go around. On a macro level, the Social Security Administration says baby boomers are retiring at the rate of 10,000 per day—in total more than 70 million before 2030. So while essential engineering jobs are going unfilled and the shortfall is requiring packag-

ers to do more with less, we're also losing experienced, bright people to retirement in numbers greater than in the past.

Many on packaging teams are pulling double duty. But therein also lies an opportunity to empower current and future packaging professionals to fur-

ther break down silos and understand packaging more holistically. To function as both a packaging and a business professional. As such, they perform not only their job, they also understand what those upstream and downstream of them do, and why, and they endeavor to become more cross-trained.

For packaging, one solution to the skills gap might be the development of broader skill sets. That requires different thinking, away from a focus only on what's in front of your packaging team right now, looking instead within the context of a longer-term investment. Over time, packaging teams with more expansive knowledge are much better prepared to proactively respond to new challenges as they emerge, with an ongoing payoff on the bottom line. **PW**

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