

Why 'Big Mouth' Bulk Containers are Shrinking

Del Williams



“Big mouth” bulk plastic containers are shrinking, and everyone from food manufacturers to club stores, grocery chains, consumers and the environment are going to benefit.

Plastic wide-mouth containers are widely used to sell bulk items such as nuts, chips, cookies, chewing gum, pretzels, and toys – typically in big box club stores. These same containers are not limited to dry goods, but are also used for everything from bulk size salsa to pickles in pickle juice. Although manufactured from the same stretch blow molding process, these plastic containers are distinguished from mass produced water bottles, for example, by their “wide mouth” for easy access, easy pouring, and overall bulk sizes.

Fortunately, as it turns out for all involved, these bulk containers are going through a literal “shrinking” process on multiple fronts. In a win-win for both the environment and the reduction of packaging costs, well thought out jar re-design has led to a reduction in the amount of plastic used without sacrificing stacking strength. At club stores, bulk container sizes are also shrinking (often imperceptibly to the consumer) to maintain price points. Not to be outdone, grocery chains eager to jump into the bulk goods market are working with manufacturers to introduce new “small bulk” sizes down to 48 oz. to compete with the club stores.

The result, in testament to the concept “less is more,” ultimately means less plastic used, lower costs, and more options for the consumer.

Less Plastic, Less Cost

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“New design techniques are enabling the manufacture of 15 to 25 percent lighter jars, with less plastic, less cost, and greater environmental sustainability,” says Jack “The Jar Man” Podnar, President of Rez-Tech Corp., a Kent, Ohio-based manufacturer of PET and vinyl plastic containers.

At Podnar’s company, for instance, new packaging-specific CAD-CAM software enables significantly less plastic to go into the manufacturing process due to improved jar geometry, design ribbing, design simulation, and other design techniques. This maximizes strength and performance for required stacking, while minimizing material and cost.

The problem with traditionally made containers is that they tend to be overbuilt, wasting material and capital, especially if not recycled.

In the stretch blow molding process typically used to make wide-mouth and other PET container types, the plastic is first molded into a tube-like shape called a “preform” via injection molding. However to simplify manufacturing, the preform which is heated and blown into the proper shape, is often larger and thicker than required. This is changing as cost and green issues become more important, and food manufacturers, retailers, packagers, and consumers turn to the lighter, more environmentally sustainable containers.

Shrink to Fit Price Points

At club stores, bulk container sizes are also shrinking to maintain price points for recession-weary consumers, who are leery to spend more but still want their brand-name products. The solution is to subtly reduce club store container size to hit price points that keep consumers buying while upholding the brand. Imperceptibly smaller “big mouth” containers at club stores, made with improved design techniques, are fulfilling the need.

“Tweaking container size and shape is faster and easier than ever before and can have significant payback,” explains Podnar. “Reducing diameter by a quarter-inch may be virtually imperceptible to consumers, but can help a food manufacturer hit a critical price point by reducing total cost by 8 to 10 percent or more. Amid cutthroat competition, this can help to win bids and shelf space.”

Smaller Jars, Bigger Market

Wide-mouth jars are also getting smaller to the benefit of non-club stores. New “small bulk” containers, typically ranging in size from about 48-oz to a half-gallon, are helping non-club stores like grocers enter the bulk food market, long dominated by club and warehouse-type stores.

“Non-club stores, who’ve wanted to do efficient pallet pack merchandising but without the excessive bulk of club stores, are now offering ‘small bulk’ containers at their end caps,” says Podnar. “This minimizes stocking, handling, and can be especially effective with wide-mouth containers.”

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Since the “small bulk” wide-mouth containers are clear, strong and presentable, they eliminate wasteful packaging practices such as partitioning, outer wrappings, or protective boxes within boxes.

In place of using new materials to manufacture the containers, which depletes the earth’s finite resources, adding recycled content to them can also give stores and consumers a way to distinguish themselves and help the cause of environmental sustainability, says Podnar. Some “small bulk” wide-mouth container manufacturers, for instance, give the option of using 15, 25, or 100 percent recycled content in the container’s manufacture.

“Another plus to the ‘small bulk’ wide-mouth containers is that consumers seek them out and reuse them for home storage of cookies, cereal, toys, nails, crayons, craft items, and other objects,” says Podnar. “Marketers and brand managers appreciate how reuse of the containers can keep their brand in front of the consumer indefinitely, which helps with the next purchase.”

Speed to Market

Whether food manufacturers are rushing to make last minute changes or meet club store/non-club store deadlines, speed to market can make the difference between winning the bid and securing shelf space or not. And in the rush to merchandise, brand must not be compromised.

“From stock to custom packaging, container shape, size, and even color can be as much a part of brand as the label,” says Podnar. “That’s why it’s important to partner with a supplier with sufficient container variations in stock, with the ability to quickly make containers from stock molds, with the ability to rapidly create new designs.”

“To win shelf space and persuade consumers to buy, the right packaging has to be ready at the right time,” concludes Podnar. “Shrinking ‘big mouth’ bulk containers are part of the solution for food manufacturers selling to club stores and non-club stores. By helping to hit price points while enhancing brand and environmental sustainability, they can also help to maximize sales and cash flow.”

For more information email info@rez-tech.com [1] or visit www.rez-tech.com [2].

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