Safety in a Bottle

By KRYSTAL GABERT, Editor, Food Manufacturing

As someone who has begun to feel more comfortable inside a convention hall than inside my living room, I'm very happy to report that November's PACK EXPO was definitely the busiest trade show I've been to this year. As I spoke with exhibitor after exhibitor, they all told me the same things: sales are up, prospects are promising, and many of their clients are embarking on new projects, including full-scale packaging redesigns.

The buzz at PACK EXPO drove home the point that, though sometimes seen as secondary to the food manufacturing process, food packaging decisions play a huge role in a company's bottom line and also in how the company is perceived by consumers. Food packaging can be made with more cost-effective materials or with fewer materials than have been used in the past. Packaging can help food manufacturers convey a specific message or present a certain image to consumers. Packaging can increase safety by protecting food from contaminants. But recently, packaging has been under increasing scrutiny by consumers concerned — and confused — about whether some specific types of food packaging pose serious health threats.

In mid-October the Canadian Ministers of the Environment and Health added Bisphenol A (BPA) — a chemical commonly found in plastic used for food packaging — to the country's toxic substances list. While not an out-right ban, adding a chemical to the toxic substances list allows the Canadian government greater flexibility in imposing restrictions on the use of the chemical. During the same week, and in the face of divergent opinions from some of its own members, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) announced that after reviewing the available data, BPA would not be labeled as toxic in the European Union. However, in an attempt to reach a scientific consensus, the EFSA has since urged further studies into the effects of BPA.

In light of the confusion surrounding the safety of BPA, some U.S. food manufacturers have begun curtailing their use of the chemical in an attempt to meet consumer demand for products free of the chemical. In late-October, USA Today reported on a study by Green Century Capital Management and As You Sow, which noted that “companies such as H.J. Heinz, ConAgra and Hain Celestial have begun using BPA-free linings in some of their cans and have set timelines for eliminating the chemical from all products.”

But is all of this confusion, panic, packaging redesigning and scientific study a waste of energy? A report made available by the American Chemical Society’s (ACS) Environmental Science & Technology journal found that the average U.S. intake of BPA was 1,000 times less than the limits set by both the EFSA and the Environmental Protection Agency. Though the ACS most certainly has something to gain from the tamping down of concerns over BPA, most consumers would likely not be affected by such a limited exposure to the substance.

The fact that the average U.S. consumer is exposed to minimal amounts of BPA may not mean much, though. I’ve never had “black lung,” yet I’m hesitant to label coal dust as perfectly safe. As scientists continue to study the potential effects of BPA, it’s important to study the harm it could cause in the highest exposure levels. A recent study showed Chinese men in a facility manufacturing plastic bottles and beverage containers containing BPA had lower sperm counts than men not exposed to the chemical. The test group for this study was very low — only 200 men — but such a finding should raise enough concern to prompt further study.

And numerous studies are already underway, as the scientific community seeks to determine whether BPA in any quantity poses a serious risk to human health. This controversy should serve to underscore the importance of packaging safety and the need to fully investigate all chemicals that come into contact with food products.

Where do you stand on BPA? Send me an e-mail at krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com [1].

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