



Session: **Michael Parks: Protecting the Products that Protect Lives**

With Shannon Curran, Michael Parks and Michael Ireland

Shannon Curran

Hey everyone, welcome to packaging unwrapped. This is Shannon Curran and I'm joined by my cohost, Michael Ireland. Today we're talking with Michael Parks, one of our packaging segment Marketing Leaders at Veritiv. We'll be discussing medical device and pharmaceutical packaging, both incredibly important industries to dive into. And I know we've really been looking forward to this call today. Welcome to the Packaging Unwrapped podcast, Michael.

Michael Parks

Well, thank you. I'm a big fan of both of you. So, I look forward to spending some time with you today.

Michael Ireland

Michael, we just want to start off with a little bit about your background. How did you come to find packaging? How did you get into the packaging world?

Michael Parks

Well, it really was by mistake actually. I started my career in the consumer products industry and fully expected to spend the entirety of my career there. But at one CPG company I worked at, they owned a distribution company that did not really have any marketing specialty or expertise at all. So, they'd asked me to work on that business for what was supposed to be a six-month project. And I fell in love with the pace and the diversity of the business. And so, I've been part of distribution ever since. I arrived at Veritiv as being a part of one of its legacy companies. And of course, packaging is one of our main focuses. So, that's where I focus a lot of my time today.

Michael Ireland

That's great. So, who inspires you?

Michael Parks

You know, like most people, I have a few. But the first person that comes to mind when you asked me that is my son. You know, he's an adult now. But he's my hero, because frankly, he's always embarrassed when I say this, but he's the best human being I've ever known. And so, I use him as a role model for myself. You know, what really gets me about my son is that he's just very empathetic. He cares about people. The biggest thing about my son is he has no ego. He's totally dependable and trustworthy. And you know, all those things that we want in ourselves and those people around us. I guess what I say all the things that might make me sound like a terrible person, but it's not that. It's just that, I know I can always be better. And I'm thankful that he can be my role model in those areas. But you know, I should also mention that I have two strong independent daughters.

Shannon Curran

Well done... That's beautiful. Our children are a direct reflection of their upbringing. So, I think you have a lot of things to be proud of right there. So, in staying in that zone, what else inspires you or influences you?

Michael Parks

Shannon, I think I take a big picture view of that. You know, in my work life, it's the strong position I've always held for myself is, I don't market the status quo. I want to constantly find

the next thing and be cutting edge. So, I think that inspires me. But the biggest thing is, you know how I live my life and what I do. I want to make sure that, you know, I'm doing all the right things as a human being. I think that inspires me to live my life the right way. But like example, for every year, I pick something I've never done before. It's not really a bucket list thing, because I don't know what I'm going to pick each year. It just keeps me growing and innovating.

And in my work, I apply that kind of inspiration to digging in deep to everything that I'm responsible for. So, as we're talking about today, you know, currently I lead our health care packaging strategies. And I don't want to just focus on the status quo, the products we provide, but learning our customers deeply, the industry as a whole, understanding how they view the world. So, I guess I would put that what inspires me is how I live my life. And that I don't rest on where I'm at but I'm always searching for that next new thing.

Shannon Curran

I know you to be somebody that constantly challenges himself and keeps himself on the tips of his toes. So, I know that makes complete sense. So, in talking about healthcare packaging strategies and all the work that you're doing there can you tell me about packaging for the medical device and pharmaceutical industries. What are they looking for when it comes to packaging?

Michael Parks

Certainly. It's not a short list. But you know, digging deep into these industries has been really enlightening to me. I think medical devices and pharma stands out to me different from any other industry. And what really impresses me about how these companies viewed their existence versus other companies, you know they do develop and sell products like everybody else, but their purpose for being as really nothing to do with that. They conduct themselves and position themselves as companies and people in those companies that contribute to human welfare and transfer patient lives and helping people live more fully and alleviate pain. That's what their purposes. So, that's really what first really just inspired me about this industry. But from their packaging perspective, I think it's also important that we help them elevate the packaging to serve that higher purpose of protecting the products that protect human life. Because you know, in other industries, their packaging is just a collection of materials and stuff they buy to wrap things up and ship them out. But in this industry, packaging has to be viewed more holistically, not just because it's heavily regulated by the FDA almost because they have to. Packaging has to begin in the early parts of the design of the design device or the pharmaceutical itself, but it also has to be managed or looked at, because like any other industry, their packaging, helps secure the product. There's still a big issue with tampering and counterfeits out in the market. So, you have to prevent that. And also has to maintain sterility from the time it leaves where it's made to the time the patient is using it. So, packaging plays a role in a lot of different ways. In the healthcare space, it's different from any other.

Shannon Curran

It carries such a heavy responsibility. And it has to be thought of first not last, right?

Michael Parks

Exactly. You know, one thing that's really starting to evolve now in the packaging space and healthcare areas, for products that reach the patient, mostly store shelves are directly shipped to them as an example is designing for all the societal inclusivity changes in our culture right now, is causing a lot of companies to look at their brand image and their names. And so there may be a lot of things that are having to look at just from their image on their packaging that's starting to be looked at.

Michael Ireland

So, who are these companies you're working with?

Michael Parks

Michael, we work with both medical device manufacturers, both branded and generic pharmaceutical manufacturers. And then there's also many companies out there that provide contract manufacturing services to those industries where they outsource some of their production. So, really the entire industry creating those products, both medical device and pharmaceuticals. And again, as I said before, it's basically those companies that make products that save and preserve human life.

Michael Ireland

I almost hate this word. But what are some of the key - challenges is the word that I hate. What are the some of the key challenges, or maybe actually will turn the positive on this. What are the key opportunities you see customers facing right now?

Michael Parks

Well, I'd like to look at it positive too, but one of them is not so much. You know, the first one to look at is the immediate challenges. And that's the immediate impact of COVID-19. Obviously, it's impacting every industry's supply chains. Up and down the supply stream are suffering from a lack of resources, most of the people that work to make things to keep their output up. In some areas supply chains are depleted, which is increasing lead times on raw materials.

Just yesterday, the suppliers of adhesive that are used to make boxes have been Force Majeure so that's going to create even more lead time issues. That's something that in this space is more critical than ever, because if a medical device can't get to a hospital for a needed surgery or pharmaceutical can't get to a patient. So those immediate supply chains are very critical. And that's something that this industry in particular is looking to really make sure their supply chains up and downstream are very transparent and connected to those needs so that they get priority.

Some of the bigger, probably more positive things... The industry as a whole is looking for more ecofriendly or sustainable packaging. This is across medical device and pharma. They have a desire for things like minimizing their packaging. Something called light weighting, which is just, you know, making it less heavy. But there's other goals. But these are also difficult in the healthcare space because they have to balance those environmental needs with childproofing needs or preventing those imitations and knockoffs I talked about, and maintaining that sterility. There's a lot of things that maybe they can't do in a very sustainable way, because they have to protect those things. So that that's kind of a double-edged sword for many of these customers.

And counterfeiting is still a big problem in this industry. A lot of these companies now are incorporating traceability. And then they also need to help through their packaging—it could be messages on the packaging, perhaps—but informing nurses, doctors and others on how to dispose of their packaging is still a challenge. You may be surprised to know that people have been known to take packaging from hospital dumpsters to create those imitations and get those bad drugs and bad devices to people.

So probably another thing that's happening right now, this is another one that's quite COVID motivated, if you will, there's always been motivation in the healthcare packaging space. But we're seeing more move to robotics, migrating up the line from pick and pack to automatic tray packaging devices that are now coming out. Navigating the sea of alternatives right now for everything being thrown at this industry is probably the biggest challenge they're facing.

Shannon Curran

When you were going through all that it sparked a question for me. How are you helping them make progress in those key areas?

Michael Parks

Well, the first thing that we're doing is that Vertiv has a wide buffet of things that we can do for our customer, but we've never presented it at a single portfolio approach. So, in the past, we would wait. If our customer had an automation project, they would come to us and we'd organize and get it ready. They're just looking to lightweight some packaging we would interface there. But so, what we've done is we've assembled our entire portfolio of all the ways that we can help our client from design through testing, through sterile packaging, all the way through distribution to their client. So, we're putting that all together in one package that they can look at to integrate with their processes. And then the other thing we're doing to that earlier challenge I talked about with the supply chain is we're making our supply chain behind us transparent to our customer. So, they can anticipate these longer lead times and maybe plan their production better. So, we're doing a lot of things just to bring things more to the surface to make them easier to access. So, they can act faster when they have a need.

Shannon Curran

All of this work. And this deep dive that is just amazing. So where did your interest in healthcare come from? Because I know you and I collaborated several years ago on that breaking the chain of cross infection. So, I think folks would love to hear the precipice of how this how that started for you.

Michael Parks

As you mentioned, it started a previous role. It was kind of serendipitously, I was walking down the hallway with our previous CEO. And she turned to me and said, "you need to find something that we can differentiate us and drive value for our customers for the next 10 years." And then she walked away. And I thought, well, what am I going to do with that?

Well, thankfully, one of those positions I hold for myself is digging deep and using facts and research to inform what I'm going to do. And so, I went to work digging into the industry. About that time, the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act was passed. And I used to brag that I read it twice before some elected official did, but I'll leave it at that. But, what I found was that a lot of people don't know is that bill was more than just access to insurance. That's all we ever hear on the news. But it also was fundamentally changing how hospitals would be paid. One of their biggest challenges at the time, is there's something called a healthcare acquired infection. This is when you go to the hospital for a planned three days stay and you end up staying six days because you got an infection while you're in the hospital. And in the past, hospitals would get paid for those extra three days. So, nobody can argue that that wasn't a good change. But those hospitals having to take all that expense now, it could have crippled them. What we did is we dug in deep, and we used our research to find out something we could do to help them and Shannon, you mentioned that because you were the creator of that, is helping them break this chain across infection. Let's find out from an evidence-based approach, why these infections are spreading from one patient to another from one department to another, and then devise a process to uncover that and then advise them on improving the cLEANing disinfection process. It should have been one of the first things they looked at and I think that bill and all those potential penalties caused them to look at it differently. So, through that whole process, I got so intimately connected with that industry that frankly, I started to feel a part of it. You know, it wasn't just a business segment we sell to it was about the life of patients, those overworked nurses and those doctors that sometimes perform miracles. So, I guess I fell in love with the industry and the people in it.

Shannon Curran

It gives a whole new meaning to your work. No, I understand. I've loved working on it, too.

Michael Ireland

So, what are you working on right now that you want people to know about?

Michael Parks

Well, Michael, I guess I would sum it up as elevating the role of healthcare packaging. You know, bringing a more sophisticated way to integrate it into their end-to-end solution. I've already talked about this, but don't look at it independently. Look at structural design, brand design, integration with your compliance requirements, innovating how it's used at the doctor nurse position. Maybe even applying LEAN principles of the packaging processes.

And one thing I've learned here is many of these companies do utilize LEAN or six sigma, but they haven't applied it to their packaging necessarily to eliminate LEAN waste and make that more efficient. So, for me, it's about moving beyond the material to help connect packaging to our customers purposes. You know, they're there to protect lives. We're there now to protect the products through packaging that protect those lives. So, to me, I guess I'd sum it up is finding ways to elevate that role. And then, as I mentioned earlier, bring it all in one easy, accessible portfolio to our clients so that they can do things faster, and they don't have to search a million places to find solutions, they can come to one place.

Michael Ireland

I know you get asked, the nature of your role, but you get asked lots of questions in a day. Let's say, what are the top one or two questions you get asked most?

Michael Parks

You know, due to the highly regulated nature of this industry, I know that we're often asked about how we manage quality. These clients amongst any other have to document just about everything they do, including their supplier management. And as a supplier to them, we have to manage our suppliers in a certain way. So, how we manage the supply stream upstream is very important to them. So, we get asked a lot. In fact, we go through audits a lot where there's inspections of our process. So, that's probably top of mind top a list.

And then the next question that we seem to get, fairly often it's kind of connected to that is, how do we help them with continuous improvement? The good news is that most of our team has been certified in LEAN principles. We've been driving LEAN through a lot of our different customers for the last seven years. And this really provides the process to be continuous improvement real. We focus on the five S's of LEAN and the war on waste, and something that we've perfected over the last seven years. So, we integrate with their overall quality management efforts, whether it's documentation, their first article requirements, or corrective actions, but always look at it from a way that we can continually improve.

Shannon Curran

Have you seen the roles change in packaging and evolve over the years? And how have you seen an evolution in how packaging is positioned? We talked about how important it is and how they should be thinking about it first, but have you seen that change?

Michael Parks

I think it's an evolution. I'm kind of looking at the full picture of the full industry here. It's really an interesting critical question, because, you know, it's my opinion, but many companies have not woken up to the fact they can't exist just to sell a product to this industry. And I think, for a lot of years, it's been that case, where people just try to get orders and sell product and maybe throw cheap price out there. But you know, especially after COVID, that has forced many people to move into the digital space. And what we're seeing a lot in the medical packaging space or device in pharma is they're getting barraged with webinars that are really just trying to sell them things.

Marketers and sales people really need to evolve beyond the product to the purpose behind it. Does it advance the customer's mission? Whether, you know, that's a sustainability play or security play? How does it impact the user? Does it make life easier or more productive? So, the old focus on product and feature, really is just outdated to me. And what customers need to know more than ever, is for companies, meaning how they market and sell, become part of their process, get integrated into their purpose and help them advance that. That's what these companies are looking for. I think both medical devices and pharma are on a mission to reduce their supply chains. Reduce that risk when things get disrupted like COVID. And they're going to have to pick suppliers that are in healthcare packaging, not just selling packaging. If that makes sense. People don't evolve, whether it's companies or salespeople, I think you can guess what's going to happen to them. I don't see every company yet having done that. You've really got to dig in deep and become part of these customer's purpose.

Shannon Curran

A stronger purpose.

Michael Ireland

For better or worse, because of the current situation that we're all in. I think we've all spent a lot of time just looking at calendars just looking ahead, looking ahead, because we're hoping and we're assessing is we're watching the weeks move on and improvements. And at the same time, I think we're all looking future forward about a lot of things coming just down the way. So, what is new in the industry that you are most excited about?

Michael Parks

Well, I think the first thing that comes to mind that really is popped out to me, Michael, is sustainability. In this industry, it's not just about using less or switching one material for another, it's really a greater cause in the space. I just been so excited to see what these companies are doing. Because they look at it like a bigger picture. It's about sustaining their companies. So, their solutions remain available to patients. It's about sustaining lives. You know, if we don't keep people healthy to enjoy our world, what value would it be in saving the world? So, these companies take a holistic approach to sustainability that goes, let's make sure we preserve and sustain our company and our employees so that we can produce these solutions. But then work on, how we can do that in a way that sports sustainable in the environment.

This industry, almost without exception is committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. And if people don't know about those, it really is more than a promise to do better in sustainability. It's a highly transparent and accountable method that has gone global, sponsored by the UN, but many companies, almost all of them in this space have signed up. And it's really about being accountable and actually taking actions, not just saying I'm committed to sustainability, but putting down programs and goals that you're going to achieve. And so, it's so exciting to see that these companies are stepping up to make a major positive advancement in what we call sustainability. And those SDGs are beyond just using more sustainable packaging. You know, it's things about elevating women in the workplace, reducing poverty. It's bigger things than just what most people think about sustainability.

But another thing is that I see that's kind of exciting to me because I am in the packaging space is it's starting to become more important in that sustainability play. But again, as I mentioned earlier, it's a balance, you got to make it more sustainable, but also preserve and protect the products that protect human life. So, bringing that balance and focus to healthcare, packaging, something personally exciting to me.

Shannon Curran

Obviously, you're a passionate person, no matter what you're working on, or tackling. What else are you passionate about outside of this?

Michael Parks I think I mentioned earlier, I'm passionate about how I live my life, not just personally, but in my career. And I have these crazy life philosophies, at least that's what my wife calls them. But one of them is what I call my rocking chair philosophy. We're all going to end up in a rocking chair. And we'll be looking back at our lives sometime. What's going to matter is how we treated people. And do we make a positive difference in someone's life. And you can do that in your work as well as your personal life. Did we conduct ourselves with dignity, were we honest, hard, working, dependable? All those things I use my son as a role model for. I'm passionate about this because I refuse to end up in that rocking chair, and be afraid to look back. I want to make sure that I can look back and smile.

Shannon Curran I love that. I want to steal that from you. What do you love most about the work you do and the folks that you work with?

Michael Parks Shannon, I think I can say this from the heart. It's something I personally feel and believe in, is our people really care about our customers. And that's not a tagline to me. I know a lot of companies say they do. But it never shows up in practice. I say that because I see things our customers may not see. I see people all over our company, doing some extraordinary out of regular definition of customer care, to make sure our customers are happy and not let down. Not because it's a good idea, or because they have to, because they honestly care. It's in the DNA of everybody who works here. It fills me with pride. If I had the opportunity to go to another company, I want to know for sure that those people felt the same way these people do at Vertiv, or else I'm not going.

Shannon Curran Above and beyond. And that's what this call has been. It's been above and beyond. Is there anything else you would want folks to know, or how can they reach out to you for more information?

Michael Parks Well, I think Shannon, that it's important that they know that Veritiv is stepping up to be more than just a distributor of a product. And it's something that we're constantly learning from. You know, we're going to be doing a series of webinars coming up. And you know, as I said earlier, this industry getting overloaded with webinars, but they're all trying to sell something. So, what we're doing is we're going to facilitate some roundtables where people within the industry, within medical device and pharma, can get on a WebEx and share best practices, ideas, ways they've overcome some of these challenges. So, we want to facilitate solution based best practice sharing conversation through these webinars. We're going to be doing a lot of things to step up and help in a lot of different ways. They can feel free to email me at michael.parks@veritiv.com. I'm also on LinkedIn if they want to connect with me there.

Shannon Curran We'll make sure to put all that in the in the notes.

Michael Parks Both Michael and Shannon, it would be great if we could have been in person. And I'm sure as COVID starts to move beyond us that we get that again. But it was great to be with you again, digitally today. And hopefully this information was helpful to those in your audience.

Michael Ireland Well, Michael, thanks so much for taking the time to speak to us today. I've said this before, I'll say it all the time. Every time I speak to you, I feel like I learned something.

