



Session: **Jim Wynne: A Fresh Take on Food Packaging**

With Shannon Curran, Jim Wynne and Michael Ireland

Shannon Curran

Hey everyone, welcome to Packaging Unwrapped. This is Shannon Curran and I'm joined today by my co-host, Michael Ireland. Today we're talking with Jim Wynne, National Sales Director for Veritiv's food packaging solutions. Thanks for joining us, Jim.

Jim Wynne

Pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Michael Ireland

Well, Jim, what we do know about you is that you're a journeyman. So, can you tell us where your journey started? And how did that path lead you to packaging?

Jim Wynne

I'm not really sure that I set out on a pathway to the packaging industry. After I graduated from college, I had a neighbor that was in the industry, and they reeled me in. And here I am... 38 years later. I haven't looked back. I really started my career with a manufacturer of packaging equipment and meat slicing equipment. Really, my primary goal there was really to just demonstrate some value to them... for a company that was willing to take a risk on me. I spent the early part of my years there really trying to develop their distribution channel the market. They were traditionally selling direct to end users and started to look at a pathway to market using distribution. Which led me to chapter two of my career, which was really on the distribution side of things, where I held a variety of sales and market positions at a distribution company, and then spent some time with a global leader of the aseptic, basically juice box, beverage business, that really gave me tremendous new insights into consumer and consumer product packaging. And I was really blessed with having the internal focus group that one needs... I had three young children, and so I had an opportunity with my kids in that position to really understand how consumers uses packages. And that was very insightful for me.

That career led me to, basically Veritiv, where I've been working now and helping to lead the efforts on direct food contact packaging, which again, is kind of a newer element for distribution—it's not traditionally been in that area. And that's been something that I've spent the last 18 years working within Veritiv. To help promote direct food contact packaging, which is really a new material and equipment segment for distribution.

Shannon Curran

I'll tell you... kids will give you the most honest feedback. So, it sounds like you have the perfect user group right there.

Jim Wynne

Sometimes it's far too honest.

Shannon Curran

Oh, yeah, there's no guessing.

Jim Wynne

And 25 years later, that honestly hasn't stopped.

Shannon Curran

I totally understand that. So, it sounds like you've had a lot of influences in your life. Who would you say is your biggest influence or your inspiration? Or your hero?

Jim Wynne

You know, it's funny to hear the word hero today. Because, you know, when we think we think of heroes, we think about famous generals, business moguls, entertainers and these sports legends. But certainly, over this past year, I think we don't have to really look very far. I think it's kind of these ordinary people that have done extraordinary work. You know, the people that are in the healthcare industry, or truck drivers or teachers, or those who work in grocery stores. I think the perspective around heroes has changed for me a lot in the last 12 months. And I would say probably the people who had the biggest influence on me, are really probably my grandparents. They were part of that ordinary group of people that provided extraordinary opportunities for their grandchildren. They have a tremendous work ethic, took great pride in the community, and service to their neighbors in need. It's people like that, that are humble... decent human beings. Those are the kind of heroes we need more of these days. That's really what I aspire to be more like.

Michael Ireland

We need those inspirations. That's what continues to drive and inspire you?

Jim Wynne

For me, inspiration comes from seeing things come together in a collective way. I've always been a big advocate of coaching teams. I like participating in teams, and I think even in the business environment, that when you see unique skills come together to contribute towards something and when it comes to fruition... it's a much better thing than it would have been on its own. I think it's very rewarding. That's the thing I've enjoyed both in personal life, as well as my professional career, is really watching people come together to develop something that is uniquely different than it would have been if it had just been one person. Because it's hard to possess all the skills needed to make it its best.

Shannon Curran

Absolutely. Speaking of working together and coming together, and staying, you know, connected with everything, how do you learn and stay on top of things, especially today?

Jim Wynne

Going back to what I mentioned earlier, in the beginning you're kind of just focused on product... you're just trying to get competent around a single thing when you start your career. And I think for me, my experience with the aseptic company and juice box business was one that really enlightened me to really understanding— it's more than just a package. It's how it relates to the consumer. How does it position itself in the store. And so, for me, I get a lot of inspiration from, and learning, is just basically going in and out of stores. You get to not only just see that product, but how it relates to other things within that store. And over time, it's fascinating to watch the consumer behavior while you're in there. Companies pay a great deal of money to have focus groups, but their focus groups are right in front of us. And I think sometimes we get so busy and wrapped up in what we do as a consumer we don't really pay attention to it. But for someone like myself in the packaging side... for me, it's an area of great inspiration to kind of walk through the store and see how people relate to the products and how they buy them. That's where I get a lot of learnings besides the information industry and attending shows, things along those lines.

Michael Ireland

So, help us better define the type of customers you are working with and even the industries they're working in.

Jim Wynne

For us, we certainly have a meaningful position at large, national processing companies. But I think, really our sweet spot would probably be those smaller to mid-size food processors that are kind of regional in nature. They don't have a great deal of strength when it comes to engineering and marketing, and they're really constrained when it comes to resources. They're constrained in terms of space. And so those are things where we can really help

those entrepreneurs develop their business. They're primarily focused on driving their top line. And they're looking for assistance on how to help them be more operationally effective... someone who can help manage their supply chains. And those are the areas that I think we bring a lot of strength, a lot of capabilities to helping them put that part at ease. There aren't resources they need to deploy or hire. They can look to somebody like ourselves to help fill that gap. And from an industry perspective, the type of sub sectors within food, certainly the meat processing areas, is one that has a great deal of interest for us. We've had great success in. With prepared foods and other more institutional baking, not so much big shops... but ones that would be more commercial baking operations, and then produce and dairy. And when we think of dairy, we think of primarily in the cultured products—ice cream, cheese area—not so much in the white, fluid milk space.

Michael Ireland

We know what the big challenge has been. We've been living through it for over a year now. What are some of the important solutions that they've needed addressed? Maybe even the pandemic has highlighted, some of the things that we've been able to address on their behalf.

Jim Wynne

I think it's a combination of some of the things, and some are more apparent than others. Certainly, one of the big ones we've seen in terms of a challenge that we're helping customers with is really just changes in consumer demand, both in terms of the volume and the variety of manufactured goods. We've also seen a higher volume of product going from direct to consumer, which was traditionally something that might have gone through food service. Today, that's e-commerce space. So those are things that we've helped customers navigate and how to mitigate quickly... from what may have been a traditional food service channel to market, to a direct-to-consumer model, or to retail. And again, I think the other big challenge that many of our processing customers have seen in terms of shortages wasn't so much shortages of food, but we didn't have the right package formats. And so that's been one of the things that helps expedite customers in terms of getting products in the right format that works from a consumer level rather than, say, a food service institutional channel to market.

And then I think the other big ones on the customer side, is really the challenges with the workforce. We've had customers that have been challenged with the pandemic in terms of shutting their operations down. So, understand that dynamic from an automation perspective, and how to help them become more efficient and operate with fewer people on those lines or greater separation—that's been a big area of focus. So, from an equipment automation area, that's an area we've been able to help customers quite a bit around. And then I think the other ones that we're seeing, and it continues today, is around supply chain challenges. We've had a lot of customers that have brought product, raw materials in from all over the globe, and they see the challenge of managing that. And in addition, just cost challenges. We've seen quite an inflationary environment, both in the resin and board side, and so we've been helping customers mitigate some of those cost challenges is another big area.

Shannon Curran

That's a lot of things to have to help customers with and to help them pivot in their industry in their business. You need a well-versed team to be able to address all those challenges. Can you tell us more about your food specialists and how they help?

Jim Wynne

I can, and I think really, when we think of the team, it's beyond just food specialists... food specialists are part of that team. And so, to your point, no one individual can possess all those skill sets. And that's why as a company, I think it's important to have supply chain logistics experts. We've got people that can help manage inventories appropriately. And

some of those additional resources... we have automation specialists that are focused specifically on the equipment side, as well as corrugated specialists and retail specialists. And one of the groups that I lead is the food specialist team. And most of come from a background where they have been really on the manufacturing side of the manufacturer materials... they've worked pretty broadly across the entire value chain. So, they can bring tremendous insights to our customers in terms of what has worked for like customers.

And maybe more importantly is to be able to take things that may have worked in one sub sector, say in the meat and prepared foods segments, and take that technology platform and learnings into another sector like bakery or produce. That specialist team, while it's relatively small, we have a group of about 11 people that work across all of our regions. Collectively, that team has probably over 300 years of experience working with different food packaging materials, and technology platforms. And I think there's a wealth of knowledge there that can be tapped into that, that our customers gain the benefit of those insights as they try to navigate some of these challenges that are in front of them.

Shannon Curran

300 years—that's a perspective to put on it! So just to kind of change a little bit here, but stay on the same path of, you know, solutions. When we talk about food, we talk about trying to reduce waste, and not just in packaging, but obviously the products themselves too. And it's a big initiative. So how do you bring solutions that reduce spoilage and extend shelf life to your customers?

Jim Wynne

I think it's an interesting one. Because when we look at the packaging industry, I mean, where traditionally the food packaging space has been dominated by what we know as glass packaging, or cans... a lot of that has moved into flexible materials today and board related materials. And obviously one of the biggest opportunities really from a challenge in terms of shelf life, which is a big issue for us as a country, I mean, we've got somewhere in the neighborhood of 42 million Americans in a food insecure situation at the moment. So, food waste is a big challenge for us. It's one that the US FDA and EPA is focused around as well. And so, this is where packaging can really come into play... it's something that can preserve food longer and keep the nutritional value of that intact, is enormous value.

Food waste is something when you think of the entire carbon footprint of food products, probably less than 10% is that it related to the packaging itself. So, the larger portion of that is in generating the food itself. It's a big issue for us. The better job we can do of eliminating that food waste, the better environmental impact we can have. And a lot of that comes from different technologies. Today, we're seeing a lot in barrier technologies. So, as I mentioned, with glass and aluminum, today, we're getting those same qualitative elements in a much thinner material. Today, you can get a year, two year shelf life on products that would have normally been in a can and you can get into flexible packaging. So, there's a source reduction around those types of products. And that continues to evolve. And it's continuing to evolve at a rapid pace. And we're moving more from what was laminated structures that were not necessarily easily recyclable product, into products that are now made of polymers that lend themselves to future recyclability. We're not quite there yet, from curbside recycling. But I think the industry is moving that way. They understand and recognize the challenges, not just for the material, but also in food storage. So, I think that's probably where we use the word sustainability. I think all too often the industry where we get into material discussion, when the broader conversation is really around, how do we ensure that we're wasting less.

Shannon Curran

So, in talking about, you know, food waste, and sustainability, like you just did, and obviously, food insecurity did not go away during COVID. If anything, it got worse. And you know, just the way we talk about sustainability and way we perceive it. And it's easy to talk about... Well, we could put it in a box that's recyclable. And we can check that box and say we feel good about sustainability. But what you're talking about is bigger. So in trying to balance, sustainability and food waste and knowing how COVID hit and security around food and safety. Do you feel like it's coming back to the forefront of conversation? I don't think it ever went away. But how do you feel it helps sustainability plays in the food industry right now?

Jim Wynne

Well, you know, it's an interesting sustainability conversation, you know, the focus is really around the material substrates. Interestingly enough, that has not gone away. You would have thought, hey, let's get product out the door. And that has not diminished at all. If anything, it's gotten heightened from a brand owner perspective... concern around their brand image, the brand narrative around the materials they're using. So, that's an important one that we're focused around. I bring it up because I think it's one of those balances, you have to get to the whole story, right? It's not just an attribute of the material that's going to make the difference.

From a consumer perspective, we need to be honest... does this product really get curbside recycled, because in the end, we got compostable materials, we have biodegradable materials, but unless the consumers really going to take that step in their backyard, there aren't really viable industrial channels to go do that, at the moment. And so, I think the consumers collectively look at, the more stuff they can put in that recycling bin at the end of the day, I'll feel better about myself. So, I think it's important for brand owners. And what we're doing with material is educating consumers on how products can be recycled, where they get recycled, from material perspective. There's enough time consumed in trying to buy your food, prepare your food, they don't want to have to think too hard about what they do on the disposal side. I think it's up to industry, people like ourselves to kind of educate brand owners so they can bring that narrative and that communication vehicle to their consumers.

Shannon Curran

Yeah, the easier we can make it.

Jim Wynne

That's right. And again, eventually, I think we will get there in terms of having all the infrastructure... we just aren't there yet. Sometimes we wait for somebody else to lead... one leads, one lags. I think collectively, the industry has to. And I think we're doing that. I think there's better alignment between specialty brand owners and retailers and the industry itself to kind of create a responsible way of dealing with packaging. I think we're getting away from the buzzwords on package attributes and looking at it in a more holistic way from the industry on hey, what's the bigger way to manage through these issues, and really, recyclability is a big one.

And I think the other part of it is, the consumer can do their part too in terms of food waste, right? Again, that's a big one that hasn't been promoted much. I think consumers are a little bit more aligned with it. And I think there is, in terms of stock up opportunities, unconscious kind of buying. We go to the store once a week... I think now, the way consumers buy has changed quite a bit. The pandemic has brought a lot of that about in terms of online, e-commerce purchases. Now consumers are like hey, I don't need to stock up, I don't need to buy one or two weeks' worth of groceries... I may get these items on my weekly list, but I'm going to backfill because I know I can have items that I need when I need them within a day or two. So, I think this may lead to more responsible purchasing on our food items as a result. And we're starting to see that.

If you look at the grocery, just the traditional grocery retailers, what their online presence is and what it has meant during the pandemic. What's more fascinating, is that increase has stabilized, and it continues to increase. As we move into a post pandemic moment, I think, last month, it was as high as it was any time in the last 12 months in terms of online grocery purchases. So, I think it's here to stay. And I think consumers are looking at their shopping experiences different than what they did prior to the pandemic.

Shannon Curran

Yeah, I know I have been. It changed everything.

Michael Ireland

It did. I'm going to the store now... looking around. I've never realized how much has gone into the packaging of these items. So, can you tell me a little bit more about hybrid solutions that are utilizing a mix of flexible and rigid packaging in the same pack?

Jim Wynne

You may have seen, for example, in the frozen area... more may have been in a resin base bowl or tray, are now in a fiber structure. It may be a laminated structure... we're seeing cured meats, as an example, in what we call thermoform packages that would have traditionally been 100%, all resin-based products, into a combination of polymer hybrid with a fiber. So, you'll start to see those emerging... we're starting to see more of that. You're starting to see materials that may have just had a resin base bottom and a resin base lid or a hinged container, to now it's a combination of a preformed tub with a lidding material on top of it. So, we're taking some of the material weight out... it's still providing the same functionality they would have had with a rigid piece. Those are small, incremental steps in terms of sustainability. But it's also changing a little bit how consumers work... it's a little bit different than what we used to... we're used to maybe a more solid, rigid snap, and the lidding film functions just as well. And in many instances, for consumers, it's not like the package is going to be open and closed 30-40 times, it may be open in many instances two or three times then disposed of. We need to align the functionality of that package with how the consumer is going to be using it. And I think that's true just in terms of shelf life too... we used to have a lot of retort product out there that was going to last a generation on the shelf. If we've got products that last a generation on the shelf, we're not going to be in that retail space for long. So, I think the cycle movement of products is accelerating in a way that lends itself to looking at how the packaging is being used with those products, because we may not need those types of barrier materials relative to providing the shelf life that's required.

Shannon Curran

This next question might be asking too much, because I think you get asked way more than one or two serious questions. So, what are one of the top one or two questions you get asked most often?

Jim Wynne

The first one at home is, why can't I get into this package? So, if packaging opening doesn't work, it's my fault. And that is my immediate family, my neighbors and anyone else I'm associated with. You guys need to fix this, right? And I'm like, I'm not you guys. So that's the first and foremost... it's funny, bad news travels fast. If there's something that doesn't work in the industry, it doesn't matter what your role is in the industry, you're going to hear about it.

The other big question we get often is from a standpoint, and I talked about it in my earlier career, of developing distribution channels to market. Is how can a company like Veritiv, that's in the distribution space, provide more value than a direct manufacturer can? They make these materials.,, what is it that you can do that's going to be better or different than what they can? And my response to that is really the beauty of being in distribution is, we have the luxury of objectivity, right? We're not locked into any particular fixed assets in a building

that's going to bring a solution. We can look at it holistically, we can look across the entire value chain...what are the components that are going to deliver value. With that provides us a great amount of influence in terms of developing for a brand owner, what's the right solution for them. Because we're not trying to pitch a specific item to them. You know, again, when I only had aseptic packaging, I can assure you that aseptic packaging with the best and only solution for a customer. When I have access to broad portfolio solutions, I really start to dig in and understand what's going to help drive that brand forward. So, for us, I think it's really that. From a customer perspective, that's really the big question. And I think it's demonstrated in terms of all that expertise. We talked about all those challenges and having a whole team of people that can help address those challenges. Not one thing, individually, not one single material solution. It's collaborative effort, both individuals in terms of suppliers that can develop the right solution for a customer.

Michael Ireland

Great! What's hot right now? What's something you want to share with us?

Jim Wynne

For us, one of the big areas is in the flexible space. I think there's a lot happening on that front in terms of vertical form, fill seal. I think there's been some traditional stuff for customers who've been in, laminated structure, I think we've got some great technology platforms that we're working with. And I think the other is around looking at different substrate materials, combining different dissimilar materials. I think is also something that we're seeing a lot of interest in.

Shannon Curran

So, Jim, of all the things you've been hearing about lately, what are you most excited about?

Jim Wynne

We're well positioned to help with one of the hottest topics, which is the case with many of our processing customers... they're looking to re-shore where the materials are coming from... there's a lot of products, whether it's flexible films, or containers that are coming from Asia Pacific markets, or even from Europe. One thing that's made them fully aware, it's the sensitivity of supply chains over the past year. And so, I think there's a lot of momentum around, how do I get this manufactured closer to where I'm at? And how can I ensure continuity of supply so that I don't get in a situation that I can't meet my sales, because I don't have the packaging in place? And I think it's one of things we saw during the pandemic is that there was no shortage of orders for these processes, they just couldn't get their hands on material fast enough to package them. And so that's probably one of the single biggest areas we're focused around right now, which is really that whole supply chain efficiency in terms of delivering product to our customers to ensure that they can get product out the door.

Shannon Curran

Gotcha. So, I feel like I'm learning so much. And a lot of the things that I might have misunderstood about the food industry are kind of being cleared up for me. What are some of the common misunderstandings about the industry that you typically see?

Jim Wynne

You know, it's all perspective. I think a lot of people think of the food industry as a lot of inertia... it's the same old, same old kind of thing. And then I think as you start to walk through, and you start to see, there's a lot of subtleties in there, there's a lot of nuances to the food itself, and how its packaged.

One thing I try to do each year is actually take on one of these new ways of, of eating, right... maybe gluten free, right? And, I don't need it, but I want to better understand that. Or most recently, I've taken on kind of a keto diet lifestyle, just to kind of better understand that space. And it's really interesting when you do that, because in my normal consumption

patterns, I wouldn't be focused on that. Whether you're either a vegan or gluten free or keto, you know, it gets challenging. You probably started to look at labels correctly, there's not a common place in the store to find these things. And you start to understand the importance of graphics and how its merchandise and is it in the right place in the store. And so those subtle things, you just don't realize that unless you're you kind of live those experiences. But if you start to walk in someone else's shoes, that may have some dietary restriction needs, it's very eye opening. First of all, the level of skews that are available, just store placements, and where you might find those items and so forth. So, for me, those are ways I stay in touch with it, I'm going to go to the store and get some bread. But if you're looking for a keto bread, there may be one SKU, it may not be in the bread aisle, it may be in a whole other part of the store. So those are things that I think are kind of interesting, you know, when you think of the different types of ways we think about eating because it seems like every year there's a new pattern. Whether that's paleo, gluten free, organic. And you realize there's a whole consumer base around that. It's really a lot of micro consumers shopping that store. You got to kind of walk in their shoes to fully understand and appreciate it.

Shannon Curran

Yeah, there's a full psychology around that.

Michael Ireland

I think this past year, confidence in the food supply really got rattled. What is something that consumers continue to undervalue about packaging?

Jim Wynne

I think most consumers don't give it a lot of thought, right? They know what they don't like, right? So, if something doesn't function right, you hear about it. But other than that, I think they just want to open, close, dispose, and they don't want to spend a lot of time thinking about it. But I think the part that probably is underestimated is the amount of thought that's going behind that package... the amount of technology, resources, that have gone into developing a material for a customer. I think that's the magic of product development, when you really hit on something, it becomes kind of a staple to the customer.

I had a roadmap in my car and that fulfilled my need. But it was until I started using Waze that the map became irrelevant. I had a daily calendar that I used, and it wasn't till we have Alexa and Siri now that that becomes irrelevant. And so I think it's the same way with packaging. It's not until you have a reclosable package, you realize, how could I ever have a package that's not easy to open? It's things like that we take for granted. And that's the part of the packaging industry, with consumer brands. We need to continue to evolve. We need to be ahead of that, because some of these things are not things that consumers are going to tell you they need. We need to identify them and bring them forward to the consumer.

Michael Ireland

Alright, Jim, here's your opportunity to shout from the mountains. What is something you wish everyone knew about the services you and your team offer?

Jim Wynne

For us, it's this holistic approach, right? We're not just a product supplier. We really have a team of people that are deeply entrenched in specific areas, whether again, it's automation, food material technology, supply chain. And so, when you tap into one, you tap into all. And I think that's the real power of an organization like Veritiv... is this holistic approach that looks across the entire value chain, not just a single item around a single technology platform that I can deliver to you. That's the single biggest messaging I would like to get across to people that are interested in pursuing anything that relates to food packaging... more than just that single item we're providing. It's a totality of all the solutions together that really have power. All too often customers launch brands and launch a new product focused with a lot of energy

around that primary package. And it fails in the market not because of the primary package. But because it failed somewhere along that supply chain to the consumer. Not enough thought was given to the distribution pack. Not enough thought was given to how it's going to be merchandised. Not enough thought was given to how the consumer is going to work with that pack. And those are the insights and value that I think of working with a company that has this team of experts across the value chain, that help you ensure that you're delivering something of value along each of those components.

Shannon Curran

So much value. In talking about what's the latest in, you know, regional grocers as they try to transform into CPGs.

Jim Wynne

Regional chains have really been quick to adapt... even on the loyalty with customers and consumers around online purchases and delivery. They've been able to adapt more quickly than some of the larger retailers have. One of the things we're seeing is just the desire to leverage the loyalty of those consumers with their own brand. What used to be a product that somebody else did for them, they're starting to do for themselves. Especially strong regional grocery chains, are themselves, processing manufacturers and developing their own brands. And frankly, leveraging packaging innovation in a unique way to their brand, probably in many ways are more effective with some of the larger national brands. And I think that's what we've also seen the smaller entrepreneurial companies do as well... they've been able to quickly adapt—take packaging and leverage it and their brand narrative in ways that it's harder for big national brands to go do that. That's probably some of the biggest areas of opportunities we've seen. Both with strong regional grocery chains, as well as more entrepreneurial type businesses that frankly, they're just a brand. They don't even have any manufacturing assets. They work with contract manufacturers relying on people like us to help connect the dots for the rest of the packaging and delivery to the consumer.

Michael Ireland

This is great. I think the one important thing we learned today is that if you have a complaint about how your packaging doesn't work, Jim is the person you should be going to. Jim, how do you want folks to reach out to you... email, LinkedIn?

Jim Wynne

If it's a complaint, they can call my home number. Because I don't think I've answered that phone in about 10 years. But if they're interested in learning more about packaging, they can reach me on my LinkedIn profile.

Shannon Curran

Jim, it's been such a pleasure to talk to you today. Thank you for all your insights, your humor and just wealth of information. Michael and I both enjoyed talking to you and learned so much. So, thank you.

Jim Wynne

No, thank you.

