

PLASTICS PACKAGING



Photo source: Bericap

Just ten companies manufacture 60 per cent of the 160 billion caps and closures in Western Europe. Indeed, the Western European closure industry is going through a period of consolidation and a real shift in material composition is taking place.

Plastics caps and closures represent 40 per cent of the total share and this is forecast to reach 50 per cent by 2009. On average, two-thirds of closures are used in the beverage industry while the remaining third is used in personal care, detergent, cosmetics and pharmaceutical sectors (source: AMI Bristol 2005).

The dynamics of the beverage industry have a positive impact on closures. Indeed, the quest for differentiation is a widespread phenomenon in all beverage sectors; choices in carbonated soft drinks are wider than ever, the water business is booming, beer is opening up to new packaging, and health and energy drinks have found their place in consumers' daily lives.

Drinkability, portability and functionality are three of the qualities that brand owners can use to differentiate their products. Caps and closures are important tools to help them meet company goals at the point of purchase and during consumption. But it's not enough for them to be reliable and affordable, consumers also want safety, convenience and functionality.

Tamper-evidence features are pre-requisites for any closure where their role is to guarantee product integrity against possible counterfeits or physical damage. They also virtually protect the invaluable relationship between the brand name and the consumer, maintaining brand loyalty, confidence and quality. Tactile, visual and audible features of tamper evidence reinforce consumer confidence.

As the key contact point between the consumer and the beverage at the moment of opening and consumption, caps and closures can either drive or reduce volume. They have a critical role to play in provid-

Top and tale

We've come a long way since the introduction of standard aluminium and crown closures. John Schrurs explores the dramatic evolution

ing optimum 'gulp' at the gym, in the car, or at school. If a closure can help the opening and drinking process, make it a fun experience or help you drink in whatever situation, why not design it accordingly?

While opening a can is still a 'one-off' action, reclosability is becoming a key convenience feature for all containers.

Non-drip, dispensing, belt loops, anti-leaking, and better grip are all examples of new functionalities offered. And as part of the packaging system, closures can help protect your product longer by extending its shelf life — scavengers in the beer and juice sectors are good examples as plastics and aluminium caps replace corks for wine.

Technological developments in the plastics industry have consequences on caps and closures, while increases in raw material prices are driving material weight reductions. Material, design and process advances are also driving innovation. As part of cost reductions and value engineering, enhanced capabilities allow processes to operate in tighter process windows, meaning that less material is needed for the same or better functionalities. From a cost standpoint, improved technologies are allowing the production of more caps and closures in the same amount of time.

Material developments are key drivers for product

integrity developments, as shown by new plastics wine closures, leak-preventing closures in the HOD (Home & Office Delivery) business (such as water coolers) or one-piece oxygen barrier solutions in the beer business.

With recycling and light-weighting concerns in mind, today's caps and closures manufacturers are investing in research for mono-material caps. This is a challenge because today's consumers are now used to caps having many properties serving multiple needs.

However, all these new developments should be put into the perspective of brand owners' financial and production limitations. Caps and closure decisions need to integrate the capital value of new capping equipment and the impact on line speeds and handling conditions.

Innovation in caps and closures is no different than in any other sector. Manufacturers will create a winning strategy by maximising their well-balanced portfolio ranging from cost reduction innovations to high-value customised niche applications.

With consumers at the heart of their innovation plans and an open mind to new ideas, only then will manufacturers make it in the market of the future.

• *John Schrurs is founder and director of Cape Decision in Belgium, an innovation business support practice for the beverage and packaging industries.*