

A LIGHTER APPROACH

Ecolean has gone beyond the popular adjective of 'innovative' straight to 'pioneering' in its 13 years in the liquid food packaging industry. With these labels now joined by 'award-winning', it is clear that Ecolean and its fresh approach to lightweight, convenient food packaging is shaping the future. Emma-Jane Batey reports.



The easy to navigate, clear communication on the Ecolean website is the perfect visual representation of its fresh thinking. The site illustrates how the dynamic company culture and focus on 'ecological thinking and environmental concern that runs like a green thread through everything Ecolean sets out to accomplish' has resulted in a truly pioneering, future-proof approach to liquid food packaging.

Responsible product, responsible growth

Swedish-based lightweight packaging manufacturer Ecolean AB has grown carefully but rapidly since it launched in 1996, initially offering a range of part plastic, part calcium carbonate barrier products. By 2000, the company had its first automated filling machine and, through a process of listening to its customers and acting on emerging trends at the very earliest

stages, began to focus on liquid food packaging in 2001. By 2002, Ecolean had established its first production site outside of Sweden in China in order to deliver packaging solutions to the Asia Pacific region, which continues to be an important territory for its products.

Ecolean now has commercial activities in 30 countries worldwide, with core markets across Europe, China and Russia, where the company has invested particularly heavily in state-of-the-art equipment and filling machines. Ecolean packaging is a common sight in the majority of supermarkets in the Baltic region, where the company enjoys a large market share. Customers in western Europe are currently most focused on the ecological aspect of their liquid food products, where presenting wine, milk, juice or liquid margarine in Ecolean packaging sends a positive message.▷



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Revolutionary ideas

The decision to focus on liquid food packaging led to the pivotal development of Ecolean’s first air-filled package – a convenient handle/pouring mechanism that paved the way for its revolutionary, award-winning aseptic packaging solution, launched in February 2009. Product director Paul Mellbin explained that the product progression came from the realisation of greatest market potential. “We initially offered various wrappings for spreads, but our product development and marketing teams saw the potential in using the chalk element to increase stiffness for stand-up food packaging. Our sales force worked hard to convince our customers to try something completely different, but their excellent initial reviews helped us to build our reputation.”

The stand-up liquid food packaging offered by Ecolean is not just an alternative, it’s added something totally new to the market with its lean-base, light weight and low environmental impact. Weighing in at only 14 grams, it’s easy to open, easy to pour and easy to empty, meaning no wastage. Marketing manager Louise Hobroh continued, “It’s a fabulous product, available in a range of sizes, all with extensive promotional opportunities. It lies completely flat when empty – it’s as thin as an envelope, which means it’s really impressive in waste handling situations, and can easily be completely emptied of product, eradicating the issue of the energy and gas of wasted products in other liquid food containers.”

The award-winning aseptic packaging brings another dimension to the Ecolean liquid food portfolio by adding one more feature to the already-innovative offer. The key advantage to the aseptic range, in >



addition to being sustainably produced and light weight, is that, as a non-chemical alternative it is perfectly suited to chilled and ambient liquid foods.

“We already have two aseptic machines in production with plans for more, especially for the UHT milk market,” Mr Mellbin told Packaging Europe. “It’s such an easy-to-use product as it arrives in ready-to-fill flat pouches that are easy to fill on site by cutting a small hole and then sealing. It’s perfect, not least for small dairies and beverage producers, because it takes very little staff training to maximise its potential.”



Adding more value

As more and more liquid food producers are moving into the high added value sector of chilled products, a reliable, flexible and ecologically responsible packaging solution is very appealing. The aseptic Ecolean product was recently honoured with the 21st DuPont Award for Packaging Innovation, a highly coveted award that has helped thrust the product onto a global stage. Ms Hobroh told us, “It’s a great acknowledgment and it shows that our light weight packaging concept is in line with the global changes in future packaging requirements. Many new customers have contacted us following the announcement as it highlights how effective and flexible Ecolean products are for a wide range of liquid food applications, both in the chilled and ambient sector.”

Ecolean also achieved valuable exposure at the Cologne Anuga FoodTec exhibition this year, gaining its largest ever order of 15 production lines in one go, largely thanks to having two machines operating at the fair, directly communicating the ‘light weight and convenient’ advantages of its products.

With 2009 bringing double-digit growth, the future of Ecolean is looking bright. The global economic slowdown has not dented its success; indeed some market share has been gained over the past year. The next 12 months will see an increase in its technological capabilities, with a further 20 aseptic machines planned to solidify its foothold in the ‘alternative to ambient packaging’ sector. “It makes perfect sense,” Mr Mellbin concluded. “Ecolean packaging is easy to use, ecologically sustainable and substantially cheaper – what’s not to like?” □