

Packaging Progress

Thinking outside the box...and inside too!

Wetoska Packaging Distributors continues family-owned legacy, customized service

By Alyssa Mitchell

ELK GROVE VILLAGE, ILL. — For almost 35 years, Wetoska Packaging Distributors (WPD) has established itself as a family-owned provider of innovative and customer-centric packaging solutions for the cheese and dairy sector. Now, in the midst of an evolving demand landscape and a global pandemic, the company continues to focus on its customers' unique needs and providing quality services at a competitive price point.

• Family-owned

Wetoska Packaging Distributors was formed in 1987 by Bob Wetoska when he purchased what was formerly known as Tobin Stahr Co., founded in 1958 by Fran Stahr and Jim Tobin. Tobin Stahr sold food packaging and other products to grocery store chains in the Chicagoland area, and Bob Wetoska joined the company in 1964 to sell a new line of vacuum packaging called the Dow Saran Wrap S Vacuum shrink bags in barrier and non-barrier resins. These bags were manufactured by Dow Chemical and were created to compete against Cryovac barrier and non-barrier shrink bags.

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DISTRIBUTORS

Bob Wetoska marketed and sold these bags to meat and cheese companies throughout the Chicagoland area and bordering Midwest states. Eventually, the company realized it also could sell the equipment these bags ran on, as well as other flexible films that were emerging the marketplace. Tobin Stahr began to buy and distribute Supervac vacuum chamber machines, and in 1987, Bob Wetoska purchased the company from his partners and

renamed it Wetoska Packaging Distributors.

Shortly after that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, his children began to work for the family business, learning every job in the company to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the business before landing in their permanent roles, says Katherine Wetoska, Bob's daughter and vice president of sales, WPD.

In 2000, Bob Wetoska's children purchased the company from him, continuing to run it with the same business model of targeting middle market, family-owned processors to provide them with exceptional service and products at a competitive price, Katherine Wetoska says. The other siblings involved in the business include Steve Wetoska, president; Mathew Wetoska, vice president of sales; Victoria Freda, partner; and Alexis Malayter, vice president of information technology.

“Being family-owned puts us in a unique position because 80% of U.S. businesses are family-owned,” Katherine Wetoska notes. “This enables us to connect with customers based on the same mid-tier level we are on.”

She adds that although WPD is not a large corporation, the company strives to provide its customers with products that will work best for their applications at a competitive price.

“We understand their products and can help them find the unique packaging solutions for issues they might have. In larger corporations, sometimes companies feel the same solution works for every problem — but we have found in the middle market, family-owned segment, while there is a solution for every problem, it's not the same across the board. We are able to provide those unique solutions,” Katherine Wetoska says.

In the early 2000s, the Wetoska children decided to exit the grocery segment of their business, as it became a commodity-driven market and no longer fit into the company's value-added business model, Katherine Wetoska notes.

“By exiting the grocery segment, it gave us the time and money to further invest into developing the processing end of the business and reinvent ourselves, which ended up giving us a tremendous growth opportunity,” she says.

• Key offerings, service

Some of WPD's key offerings for cheese and dairy packaging include



Photo courtesy of Wetoska Packaging Distributors

FLEXIBLE SOLUTIONS — Some of Wetoska Packaging Distributors' key offerings for cheese and dairy packaging include thermoform, horizontal and vertical form-fill-seal barrier and non-barrier films; barrier and non-barrier shrink bags, pouches and gas flush liners; and injection-molded, thermoform cups and lids. “Barrier products are the basis for our existence,” notes Steve Wetoska, president.

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“Barrier products are the basis for our existence,” he says. “Since 1964, this category defines who we are and what we specialize in.”

Steve Wetoska notes WPD has a field sales team with a combined 250-plus years in packaging sales as well as a dedicated customer service team.

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and reduced freight costs,” he says.

WPD also offers customized inventory management programs coordinated through its field sales and customer teams, he adds.

Food safety is WPD's No. 1 priority, Steve Wetoska says, noting the company is Safe Quality Food (SQF) Quality Certified.

“It's critical that we maintain pace with our customers,” he notes. “We only partner with vendors who are SQF/BRC/ISO certified — this keeps the food supply chain strong and enables us to provide 100% transparency and traceability from start to finish.”

In addition to food safety, WPD also keeps its finger on the pulse of key trends including sustainability and automation. The company offers a recycle-ready line of thermoform form-fill-seal films that contribute to a circular economy, Steve Wetoska says.

Turn to WETOSKA, page 9

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WETOSKA

Continued from page 7

“Sustainability will be critical in the next 5-year period for packaging as demand for sustainable solutions continues to emerge from big retailers including Walmart, ALDI, Costco, Kroger and national restaurant chains like McDonald’s,” he says. “Packaging companies will need to work with industry to develop a circular economy — something that already is in place in Europe.”

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While the infrastructure to establish such a system is behind in the United States, WPD offers sustainable options like multi-layer films for down-gauging, thin-walling for cup and containers to reduce waste and lessen the carbon footprint, as well as fewer trucks on the road, Steve Wetoska says.

Meanwhile, the company also has its hand in innovative technologies like new printing technology for cups/lids and shrink sleeves that allows for a tactile feel and enhanced metallic colors like gold and silver. Customers also are seeking more reseal films for sliced cheese and sliced lunch meats, WPD says.

Katherine Wetoska says digital printing offers a great shelf presence with raised printing for touch and feel or metallic prints that offer bold designs that stand out on the shelf.

“Customers are seeking greater brand and logo presence in marketing this way, as well as social media,” she says. “In the past, marketing would be done through traditional advertising methods like print and television, as well as custom printed packaging. There was a significant initial investment in pre-press artwork and plates, and large minimum order requirements that strapped the customer with large inventories to manage and pay for. Now, with digital printing, a customer no longer needs to make these sorts of investments.”

High-quality inkjet printing also allows for fractional sized printing jobs, she adds, noting similar things are happening with labels, and there are

more sophisticated labeling systems, such as auto labelers with high-quality graphics and varied substrates.

In addition, while stalled somewhat by the global COVID-19 pandemic, demand for robotic solutions continues to grow, Katherine Wetoska notes.

“The use of automation, including robotics, is becoming more widespread,” she says. “COVID has impacted these trends by slowing down the progress due to shortages in labor and materials in the processing plants. The advances and investments are slow to be made at this time due to escalating costs across the board and loss of the labor force.”

• Customer focus

As technology and innovations evolve, one thing remains the same — WPD’s continued focus on superior customer service.

“When my Dad started in this business, he always emphasized the importance of customer service — knowing the customer personally, knowing the products they purchase from us and knowing how to help them if an issue were to arise,” Katherine Wetoska says. “Our focus is making sure the customer is taken care of, that we understand their needs and help them find the best packaging option for their products. There is a connection of respect and understanding of one’s business and business challenges.”

WPD is invested in the success of its customers and their businesses, as well as its own employees, she adds.

“Our training enables our inside sales staff and technical service team to effectively help the customer when ordering products, understand the products they order and help find solutions when there are issues,” she says.

She notes WPD has created pricing matrixes and cost models to ensure competitive pricing and offers custom-



Photo courtesy of Wetoska Packaging Distributors

FAMILY-OWNED — Wetoska Packaging Distributors is a second-generation, family-owned company, and it strives to treat its customers and employees like family, too. Pictured, left to right, are: Matt Wetoska, vice president; Sue Earley, accounting; Barry Brandell, general manager; Joan Ramsus, purchasing; Renee Everson, inside sales; Steve Wetoska, president; Rigoberto Valencia, warehouse; Kevin Kreslin, warehouse management trainee; and John Kreslin, warehouse/service manager.

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ized inventory management programs.

“We also offer field technical assistance, and we perform trials, tests, audits and benchmarking on new materials that might better serve the needs of the customer. We have dedicated customer service representatives, and we meet regularly to exchange ideas and discuss current issues and topics in the field and industry that need to

be addressed, whether it’s new packaging to present to customers or trends that need to be monitored in order to continually service the customer at the level in which they deserve and expect,” Katherine Wetoska says. “We hope by doing all these things, it will continually give our customers confidence in us, so we can continue working with them and help them with their packaging needs.

“It is important to us for our customers and employees to know how much they are valued, and we work hard every day to earn their trust and show we care,” she adds. “We’re like one big family — this is the business model we have used for years, and the second generation has carried on those values and beliefs. We continually nurture this trust and loyalty between ourselves, our customers and our employees, and we hope to continue for many years to come.” CMN

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