Accessible packaging: easy does it

For most of us, packaging that is difficult to open is a minor inconvenience. A tight jar lid or a tray of vacuum-packed meat is something we manage without a second thought. For the older generation, or people with disabilities, being unable to open essentials such as food and medicine is much more than a minor frustration – it also significantly impacts wellbeing. Karen McKenzie writes.

ABOVE: Australian fruit packing company SPC is one of very few companies to have achieved the ETO Certification.

PEOPLE worldwide are living longer. Globally there is a proportional growth of older people in the population. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), we are only at the start of a huge demographic shift, with the number of people over 60 expected to double by 2050, reaching 2.1 billion. In November 2021, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that 16 per cent of Australia's total population were aged 65 and over. The same report also projects that older Australians will reach between 21 and 23 per cent of the total population by 2066.

While it is positive news that we are living longer, ageing does come with increased health challenges such as movement disorders, arthritis, chronic pain, and many other age-related degenerative disorders. Combine a growing ageing population with the five million Australians living with a disability, and a market need becomes apparent.

Arthritis Australia has an accessible design division focusing on packaging design. Packaging is tested, rated on a scale of -8 to +8 for ease of opening and can be awarded an Easy to Open (ETO) Certification. A quick look at its website, particularly at products with certification, indicates a real gap in the market. The testing is rigorous, and a certain level of investment is required. Arthritis Australia also runs an annual campaign highlighting the worst and best packaging via nominations and votes from consumers. The results of 'That's a Wrap' can be found on the Arthritis Australia website.

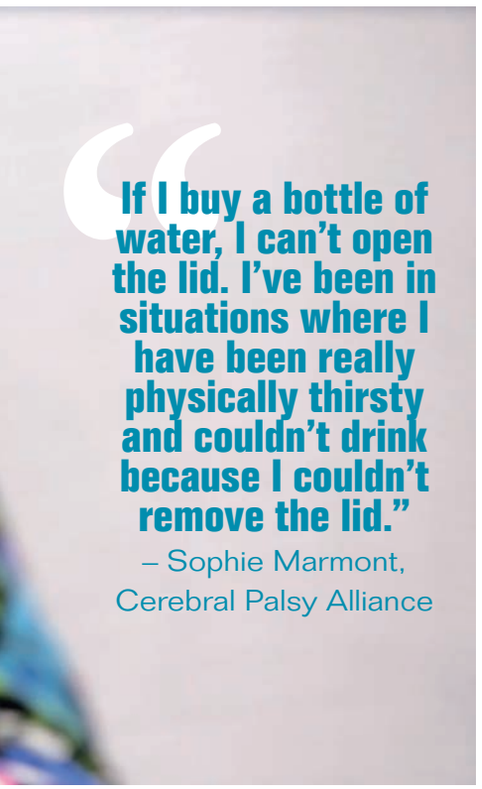
Australian fruit packing company SPC is one of the few companies that have reached the standard and achieved the ETO Certification. Maria Norton, senior brand manager at SPC, told *PKN*, "We recognise that for those living with fine motor skill difficulties and an ageing population, accessible packaging and design is paramount." With this in mind, SPC developed the ProVital easy-to-open cup range. Norton says, "To ensure optimal usability, we collaborated directly with Arthritis Australia's Accessible Design Division and Healthshare NSW to ensure accessibility is at the core of our design".

At the recent AUSPACK 2022 Leaders' Forum, Rose Herceg, AUNZ president of communications and creative industry organisation WPP, when speaking about trends to follow, spoke about Australian seniors saying, "Fifty-five per cent of Australia's wealth is held by those over 65. There are huge opportunities here. Ask yourself, what does your organisation do well, and what can it do for this market that it wasn't doing last week."

ESSENTIAL ACCESS

Alexandra Brayshaw, accessible design manager at Arthritis Australia, is all too aware of what organisations can do for this market. She says, "Packaging is something you have to open multiple times every day. If you're in pain already and have to do tasks that require fine motor skills or hand strength, a condition that causes more fatigue and pain can make it impossible."

Going on to talk about a former director at Arthritis Australia, she recalls, "An independent woman in her forties, Wendy has been living with the condition since childhood. Despite being told she would be unable to achieve things, Wendy went to university, became a speech therapist, and went on to have a family." She adds, "If her children wanted a jam sandwich and the jar wasn't pre-opened for her, she couldn't give them that. A simple task but a huge barrier to being a mum and



"If I buy a bottle of water, I can't open the lid. I've been in situations where I have been really physically thirsty and couldn't drink because I couldn't remove the lid."

– Sophie Marmont, Cerebral Palsy Alliance

not being able to feed your children. It has a huge impact on our community."

The community to which Brayshaw refers is growing. Alongside her role as lead designer at Arthritis Australia's Accessible Design Division, she was instrumental in the formation of the Accessible Product Design Alliance (APDA). Established in 2019, APDA is a group of 11 not-for-profit consumer health organisations representing people with chronic conditions who are considerably affected by inaccessible products and packaging. With strength in numbers, the Alliance advocates for government and industry to improve access to products and packaging that are easy to use for these consumers and to increase research in the area.

"One of the goals for next year," says Brayshaw, "is to get more consumers involved and have their voices heard in the design process."

One of the many voices wanting to be heard is that of Sophie Marmont, youth and life skills coach at the Cerebral Palsy Alliance. Marmont has been living with Cerebral Palsy since birth so she knows many tips and tricks to get around challenging packaging but says that when she is out and about, it is a different story.

"For example, if I buy a bottle of water, I can't open the lid. I've been in situations where I have been really physically thirsty and couldn't drink because I couldn't remove the lid."

Now married with a teenage son, she does the cooking and food preparation for her family. "Opening a jar or bottle can be very problematic," she says, "I have to wedge it between my knees and use a towel. It can often take up to 10 minutes to open a bottle." Despite having various tools to assist with some packaging formats, it isn't always easy. Often packaging can be damaged by the tools, or worse still, ill attempts with tools can cause injury. "It can be very frustrating," says Sophie. "There are ways to open things, but they aren't always the safest. I try to use scissors rather than knives but can still hurt myself."

According to Brayshaw, this is a huge issue, with some packaging formats worse than others. Those requiring a tool to open, with no opening point, such as clamshell packaging, are particularly bad. "It can be scissors," says Brayshaw, "but people often resort to knives; I've even had one person using a hand saw and cutting themselves. This is why we advocate for packaging that doesn't need tools to open it."

Prof George Mellick, president of Parkinson's Australia, also recognises the problems consumers face, saying, "People living with Parkinson's experience difficulties with fine motor tasks and dealing with certain forms of packaging can present a particular challenge. We would support anything that reduces these challenges."

5 million

Australians & New Zealanders with a disability, disabling chronic condition and/or aged 65+ are represented by the Accessible Product Design Alliance.

MEDICAL PACK REDESIGN

A common challenge is medication packaging. Like many other conditions, arthritis medication must be taken in a timely manner; if it can't be opened, this isn't possible, and people who live alone must find a way around it.

"I've had consumers decant the medication into a non-childproof container – very dangerous," she says. "I've even heard of people asking their children to open the containers for them, which is quite horrifying."

US athlete Jimmy Choi was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2003. The world record holder for the most chest-to-ground burpees in one minute, he chronicles his daily struggles living with Parkinson's on TikTok. A recent video of him trying to open a pill bottle while shaking went viral and inspired the 3D community on TikTok to help him access his pills, joining forces to invent a pill dispenser that can isolate a single pill for the user. The response from around the world was overwhelming, and within days, a prototype was designed. With the design, the user turns the knob at the base of the bottle to isolate a single pill; they can then pop the pill into their mouths straight from the bottle.

Choi's story highlights the power of communication. People often ask him, "Why are you telling people everything you know about Parkinson's?" He says his reply is always the same, "You just never know who is listening."

There were five finalists in the Accessible Design category at this year's Australasian Packaging Innovation and Design Awards (PIDAs) who have evidently been listening – Caps & Closures with EzyGrip Cap; Production Packaging Innovations with Dsmile Box; Glaxosmithkline Consumer Healthcare Australia with Voltaren Osteo Gel 12 Hourly (which went on to win gold); Nestlé Purina Australia with Nestlé Purina Total Care (Pet Accessories); and Amcor Flexibles with Australia Flowtite NS.

The momentum is growing and this often-forgotten community is beginning to be heard.

Well, Australia, who else is listening? What can your organisation do for this market that it wasn't doing last week? ■