Accessibility survey reveals

There seems to be a disparity between the views of the packaging industry – and the average consumer – when it comes to how easy products are to open.

WHEN Arthritis Australia's Alexandra Brayshaw led a research study focused on the 'openability' of packaging, she found that makers of packaging were far more optimistic about their products than those using them.

Her survey on accessibility was designed to address the key safety concerns of consumers when it came to food packaging. In the past, hard-to-open packaging increased a consumer's risk of injury – as well as their frustration levels. This year, Brayshaw set about providing a fresh assessment of packaging to find out if this was still the case.

The project, supported by Arthritis Australia's accessible design division, sought the perspectives of both the industry and the consumer. Two parallel surveys were conducted with 411 consumers, and 87 members of the packaging industry.

Both groups shared their perspectives on what the consumer's experience might be across 30 packaging formats and opening features.

WHO FINDS PACKAGING HARD TO OPEN?

The survey results revealed that industry thought consumers found packaging difficult to open once or twice a week, but the top consumer result revealed that 44 per cent of consumers struggled with packaging every day, according to Brayshaw.

"From a gender perspective, industry thought women would struggle most, closely followed by 'men and women would struggle equally'," she said.

"This perception was very close to reality, with data revealing both genders have difficulty, but women struggled more frequently."

Interestingly, when viewing the result from a pain perspective, the data revealed that the more often consumers experience pain in their hands (on a daily basis and not associated with opening packaging), the more frequently they struggled with packaging. This response was different to industry's perception that 25 per cent of consumers would struggle, irrespective of whether the consumer experienced chronic pain in their hands.

TOP SURVEY FINDINGS

Participants were provided with the following eight potential responses for each of the survey's 30 packaging types. The top answer for each response was:

- Opened it easily – 63 per cent of consumers and 73 per cent of industry thought resealable slider pouches were easy-to-open and reseal, making it the packaging format that received the highest amount of positive consumer feedback.
- Opened it after a struggle – Half of consumers surveyed had struggled when opening or resealing zipper seals on pouches.
- Asked someone else to open it – Many consumers found that plastic bottles with plastic caps, such as water bottles, were difficult to open. As consumers

When packaging can't be opened, it presents a major barrier to consumers being able to use the product it contains, Brayshaw said. Glass jars with metal lids was the main packaging format consumers just couldn't open.

gaps

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purchased this type of packaging when they were out and about, they often needed to ask someone else to open the bottle, and when they were travelling alone, they needed to ask a stranger or the shopkeeper for help.

- Needed to use a tool to open it – Consumers got creative with tools like knives, to remove induction seals with three tabs. In equal top position was stickers over lid and container, such as used for some premium jam varieties. Consumer feedback also reflected that injuries were often caused when consumers used tools.
- Could only open it partially before needing help or a tool – Consumers found that they could only open tear strips and panels partially before resorting to assistance. This finding should encourage manufacturers to undertake more quality assurance testing to ensure this opening feature meets consumer expectations.
- Couldn't open it at all – When packaging can't be opened, it presents a major barrier to consumers being able to use the product it contains. Glass jars with metal lids was the packaging format consumers just couldn't open.
- Hurt themselves opening it – Consumers also found that they hurt themselves when trying to open glass jars.
- May not have opened this type of packaging before – Surprisingly, 37 per cent of consumers surveyed had never opened a plastic cap on a pouch before, even though commonly used for baby food and yoghurt products.

THE IMPACT ON CONSUMERS

Struggling with packaging can take an emotional toll on consumers, Brayshaw said.

"Industry expected they would be angry, but the top three consumer responses also included 'upset' and 'infuriated'. Using a tool such as knives, scissors and screwdrivers when opening packaging can also increase the risk of a consumer spilling or damaging the contents, which can lead to unnecessary waste."

Industry thought 25 per cent of consumers might have had this experience while, in reality, 92 per cent of consumers had damaged or spilt a product when they had difficulty with the packaging. Once consumers had a negative experience, industry and consumers thought they would look for the product in a different type of packaging, while 21 per cent of consumers said they would look at buying a competitor's product.

WHAT NEXT?

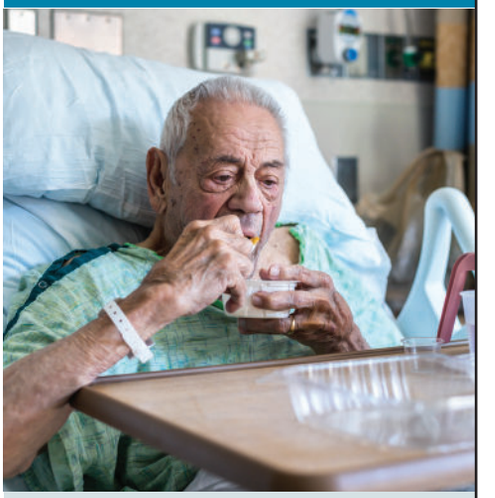
Brayshaw said the results of the two surveys lay a foundation for the packaging industry to reflect and explore their perceptions, which currently appear to be far more optimistic than the consumer reality.

"The results also highlight opportunities for companies to innovate and differentiate products through the accessibility of their packaging," she said.

"By doing so, they can also avoid unnecessary negative impacts on consumers on an emotional level as well as a physical one." ■

Alexandra Brayshaw MAIP, is an Accessible Packaging Researcher for the accessible design division of Arthritis Australia. She was also named the joint Young Packaging & Processing Professional of the Year in 2017. She conducted this research as part of the Diploma in Packaging Technology course she undertook through AIP as a result of winning an APPMA scholarship.

HOSPITALS RAISE THE STANDARD



IN 2016, food packaging accessibility became a requirement for half of public hospitals in Australia.

For the elderly or those with a disability, food packaging can be an insurmountable barrier. Recognising this, Health Purchasing Victoria (HPV) signed a state-wide catering supplies contract, partnering with Health Share NSW, to mandate that public hospital suppliers provide Packaging Accessibility Ratings.

Combined, Victoria and NSW represent more than half of Australia's public hospitals, and hard-to-open food packaging represents a significant risk to patient care as it prevents patients from receiving adequate nutrition.

The rating estimates the percentage of consumers who can safely open portion-control food packaging, and uses a scale to determine how easy and safe packages are to open.

The rating is used on a comparative basis, for example, if one supplier has a higher rating than another, it will provide them with a competitive advantage when hospital staff select products from the HPV Catering Supplies contract.

The rating was developed in collaboration with HealthShare NSW, Arthritis Australia, Nestle and GTRI (USA).

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