

PATHS TO GROWTH

Leading Canadian packaging distributor leverages its expertise in packaging automation and sustainability to answer the fresh produce market needs



Founded in 1963, **Crawford Packaging** is one of Canada's largest and most versatile distributors of packaging equipment and consumables—running a highly integrated network of nine distribution centers across North America to service customers across a broad range of manufacturing industries.

In recent years, the company has identified the fresh produce industry as a promising and lucrative segment that could benefit from Crawford's formidable expertise in packaging automation and shelf-life optimization, while rewarding Crawford with brisk business growth and expanding customer base.

To find out more about the company's successful foray into the produce market, the *Canadian Packaging* magazine recently reached out to its vice president of produce packaging Stuart Jackson to share some of the reasons for that success to date.

Q Please relate the history and strategic importance of the fresh produce market to your company and its business objectives.

A The produce industry is strategically important for our company due to several key factors. It has emerged as a growth sector, particularly with Canadian growers and marketers expanding into the U.S. and Mexican markets. This expansion aligns well with our business model—focusing on supplying integrated packaging solutions to meet the increasing scale of operations in this sector.

Since we provide primary packaging for produce, we are exposed to evolving

consumer preferences. There is currently a growing demand worldwide to reduce excess packaging and provide environmentally friendly alternatives, driven by increasing consumer awareness and sustainability concerns.

This creates positive pressure for our team to look for, source and develop solutions that align with the needs of retailers.

Our team members are extremely knowledgeable and passionate about the industry. We are not limited by geographical boundaries, and we stay ahead of the trends globally, enhancing our competitiveness and overall position as a company.

Q What are the primary factors driving growth in demand for fresh product packaging?

A There are several factors. Firstly, rising awareness of health and nutrition leads to increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables year-round. Convenience is also crucial, as consumers seek easy-to-use packaging solutions for quick, on-the-go consumption.

Additionally, there is growing environmental consciousness with consumers, and consequently the retail industry, demanding sustainable packaging options that align with global sustainability goals. This demand fuels innovation towards reducing plastic usage and extending shelf-life.

While there are also voices advocating for eliminating packaging altogether, it's important to remember that packaging plays a crucial role in reducing food waste, considering the very long distances some types of produce must travel to reach our store-shelves.

Utilizing the right packaging can preserve freshness and reduce food waste, which has reached alarming levels in North America alone.

The fully-recyclable GrowPack Net Trays, made with 50 per cent less plastic, are one of many innovative sustainable solutions offered to the fresh produce industry by Crawford Packaging.



Stuart Jackson,
Vice-President,
Produce Packaging,
Crawford
Packaging.

The RGDMAPE VR8 flow wrapping machine offers outstanding operational flexibility and versatility.

Q Which are the most popular packaging formats and materials in the produce industry nowadays?

A Regarding the most popular containers, materials, and formats, these include lidding film, recyclable bags, plastic containers such as clamshells and trays, flow wrap film, shrink-wrap film, and biodegradable containers. Materials include PP, PE, PVC, PET, paper, and fiber. There's an increasing demand for PCR content in plastic packaging, reflecting the industry's commitment to sustainability.

Lastly, there is what we refer to as functional packaging, which includes MAP (Modified Atmosphere Packaging), solutions, gas-flushing techniques, and other processes focused on extending shelf-life and reducing waste.

Q How has produce packaging evolved in the last decade? What are some of the biggest innovations unveiled in that time?

A The last decade has seen a noticeable surge in sustainability efforts, with the primary focus on reducing and optimizing packaging materials to minimize waste and environmental impact.

Innovations such as lighter-weight materials and designs aimed at decreasing plastic usage have become widespread. Additionally, there is a growing adoption of recyclable, biodegradable, and compostable materials to combat plastic pollution and contribute to a 'Circular Economy' model.

Functional packaging innovations, such as Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP), have transformed the way produce is packaged and stored. These technologies adjust the atmosphere within the packaging, slowing down the ripening process and extending the freshness of fruits and vegetables. This advancement not only benefits consum-



PACKAGING FOR FRESHNESS



(Left) The fully-automatic Revolution tray-sealing machine from Packaging Automation processing fast-moving trays of fresh produce.

(Right) The Evolution S tray-sealer from Packaging Automation is claimed to be the world's fastest and most advanced tray-sealing machine.



ers by providing fresher produce, but also significantly reduces food waste.

Also, packaging automation has made significant strides over the past decade. For example, flow wrap technology has become popular for its efficiency and flexibility in packaging—maintaining freshness, and offering environmentally friendly options.

However, one of the most impactful automation innovations has been the ongoing refinement of automated tray-sealing technology.

This innovation has had a profound effect on the produce packaging industry, addressing various needs such as reducing plastic usage, preserving produce fresh-

ness, facilitating convenient supply chain handling, and enhancing consumer convenience. Furthermore, it allows for excellent marketing presentation of produce.

Q What are the biggest trends in fresh produce packaging right now?

A Sustainability is undeniably at the forefront of industry trends. The pressing need to address environmental concerns has led to a concerted effort to reduce plastic use across the packaging sector. This trend goes beyond simply reducing plastic: it entails a broader shift towards integrating biodegradable, compostable and recyclable materials into packaging

solutions. The overarching goal is to minimize the environmental impact of packaging.

Other sustainability practices include reducing harmful chemicals, conserving water, and minimizing carbon footprints by incorporating various eco-friendly packaging solutions.

At the same time, convenience has emerged as another driver in packaging innovation—reflecting changing consumer lifestyles that are increasingly fast-paced and mobile.

There is a growing demand for easy-to-carry, resealable, and portion-controlled packaging solutions. These provide consumers with the flexibility to enjoy fresh produce on-the-go, while reducing food waste through improved portion management.

Q What has been the impact of automation on the packaging process and products used in the fresh produce industry?

A Automation has transformed the fresh produce packaging process—leading to increased efficiency, improved consistency, and quality, along with significant cost reductions. It has also enhanced the flexibility of packaging operations, allowing quick adjustments to meet changing market demands.

Automation supports speed-to-market, ensures efficient use of materials, promotes waste minimization, and enables improved food safety through more controlled and consistent packaging processes.

At Crawford Packaging, we offer a variety of packaging automation equipment solutions, with the most popular being tray-sealing and flow wrapping equipment.

We recently installed a flow wrapping machine at a medium-sized pepper grower who heavily relied on manual labour.

With high employee turnover, they found it challenging to employ and train new people—resulting in inefficient processes and inconsistent seals on their pepper packaging.

With the new automated flow wrapping solution, they were able to reduce the number of employees on the line from 16 to just seven, reallocating the remainder to other tasks. In addition to greater productivity, they reduced their per-pack cost by 40 per cent, while achieving 100-percent accurate sealing.

Q What is Crawford Packaging's value proposition to the fresh produce market?

A We have a highly dedicated and passionate team in our produce packaging department, where everyone is committed to sourcing, providing, and even developing innovative packaging solutions for North American growers, marketers, and retailers. This commitment has been and continues to be our greatest asset.

Our focus on innovation, sustainability, and efficiency is what sets us apart in the market.

We offer a diverse range of products and services. Some of our latest introductions include fully recyclable net trays made with 50-per cent less plastic, flow wrap film, paper top seal, mono-layer top seal, compostable flow wrap, a variety of compostable trays and punnets, shelf-life extension bags, and high-speed tray sealing. We also offer the world's fastest tray sealing machine, which is truly remarkable!

Moreover, we are continuously searching for better and newer solutions. This drive for continuous innovation and improvement is deeply ingrained in our organization.

Our customers rely on us for our packaging expertise, and their satisfaction is paramount for us.

We assist them in achieving their sustainability goals, extending shelf life, and enhancing the presentation of their produce, all while ensuring cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

Their satisfaction, business loyalty, and friendships are our greatest rewards.

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