Old School or Retro-cool: Is Paper Dead in Sterile Packaging?

Cost containment vs. quality and safety. This is the balance perpetually sought by all of us on the global med-tech supply chain. Healthcare economics are heavily impacting how we make products to supply the patient care system. That trend is likely to continue. And like it or not, packaging falls near the top of perceived savings centers. We find ourselves with a unique opportunity as packaging takes on responsibility for another life: that of sustaining the viability of hospitals and providers.

If our holy grail is to reduce costs while ensuring sterile packaging performance, where do we start? At the beginning, with a look at materials. We encourage our R&D departments to innovate packaging science that will lead to new frontiers. And then, we should remind ourselves to tap the brakes and ask, "Am I trying to reinvent the wheel?"

The approach is akin to generations of moms (and modern dads) who have echoed "eat your broccoli" as their mantra. Decades later, it remains a smart option. So what of the new kids on the block, like superfoods, milk alternatives and impossible burger? Do they kick mom's wisdom to the curb? Not at all. With a simple step back, we realize that broccoli, oat milk, and plant proteins can effectively coexist. So it is with packaging papers, plastics, and polymers.

Paper was a packaging industry staple when flexible packaging emerged post-war from the cold, hard days of glass and metal. But new plastics and polymers then came along and stole the show, often with good reason. But over the last few years, it's become clear that paper's still got it, too.

Paper is proven and economical. The paper industry has also transformed, and since the early 2000s, seen significant quality gains and process improvements. Oliver has built on those enhancements to increase paper's suitability for medical packaging. For example, our paper coating technologies (Oliver Hot Melt® and SealScience®) offer high-performance print capabilities and creep resistance to improve sterilization and distribution reliability.

For high volume, printed (often in-line) products, paper packaging with Oliver's SPR 112 and SPR 85 offer a solution for products such as surgical kits, wound care, gloves, and soft or smooth products. Paper is also one of the most versatile products for sterilization methods, able to withstand gas, radiation, and steam. Our papers are also proven to seal over a broad spectrum of conditions, with consistent peel performance at the point of use.

These medical-grade papers often outperform other products in the marketplace. With this new science and paper's affordability, we predict that the role of paper in medical device packaging will continue to evolve—and grow. Oliver is committed to sustainable and footprint-reducing packaging products of all kinds, including humble, high-performing paper!