

How to put your deli on the MAP*

Modified atmosphere packaging is getting a new look as a way to keep waste from spoiling your sandwich profits. Branding also continues to be a hot strategy. Here's how each path has helped retailers put more meat on their deli's bottom line.

By Mike Johnson, contributing editor

When Roxie Westgate heard about a vendor offering 50 different sandwich varieties and a guaranteed refrigerated shelf life of 42 days, she figured it was too good to be true.

So Westgate, who oversees the deli at 31 Wesco, Your Neighborhood Store locations in western Michigan, decided to check it out. She asked the vendor, Classic Delight of St. Marys OH, to send in a rep.

"He had me try a sandwich sample and asked me how it was," she recalls. "Then he told me it was 40 days old! I about killed him! But the sandwich was fine."

The good condition of the 40-day-old sandwich convinced Westgate that the technology used by Classic Delight—modified atmosphere packaging (MAP)—might offer her deli a fresh approach to sandwiches.

Wesco used to make its own sandwiches in a central commissary. "Waste was killing us," she reports. "The dates were just too tight.

No throwaways

There are many alternatives to fullblown, in-house cold deli programs, but few are as revolutionary as MAP. The 30-year-old European technology is now being applied to individual sandwiches, promising to virtually eliminate throwaways.

Manufacturers are claiming refrigerated shelf lives for individual, fresh sandwiches of 42 to 60 days.

The special process, conducted in superclean, refrigerated environments, evacuates oxygen from the package and back-flushes in a carbon dioxide/nitrogen mixture. The resulting "atmosphere" surrounds the product and retards bacteria growth enough to allow the remarkably long code dates.

Westgate even visited the plant to see for herself how these unbelievable holding times could be possible. "First you think they're loaded with preservatives, but they're not," she says. "They use only real meat and cheese and everything is spotless."

While switching to M.A.P.-wrapped sandwiches has not dramatically increased sales for Wesco, it has improved profits. "We still have waste but nothing like before," says Westgate. "I think it's the way to go." Wesco's commissary now distributes the M.A.P. Sandwiches with its own label added next to Classic Delight's.

"Lots of people are taken aback by the long packaging date," says Darl Harkleroad, president of Classic Delight. "But the proof of the pudding is in the sampling — it's really a premium product." He says stores set their own retails, typically earning 25% to 50% margins; most fall in the 35% range.

* As seen in Convenience Store Decisions, August 1993.