All in a knot

By Gareth Richards

Lesson: It’s worth your while to find the right packaging solution

We’ve all experienced it: the lid that doesn’t quite open. How much time does humankind spend dealing with troublesome packaging?

Time was when you needed a can opener or a big, sharp instrument like a rifle bayonet to open a can of beer. Now, thank goodness, all we need do is pull the ring-pull, fold it back out of the way of our thirsty lips and swallow away.

Well, not quite, if you happen to be a Windhoek beer-from-a-bottle drinker (the only way for real aficionados – cans supposedly don’t hold the flavour). You still need an opener. Or very strong teeth. You certainly can’t do it like the babe in the SUV commercial who screws off a beer bottle top in her eye socket and hardly bats a pretty eyelid. Try this with a green bottle of Namibia’s finest, and chances are most of your eyelid will come with it. Sadly, screw-top lids have not yet become a feature of the good stuff from that delightful neighbouring country. But then the same applies to some of the new cooler and other exotic new drinks on the market. Who knows how many Saturday night revellers end up at casualty because they assumed the serrated edge of the sealing top would come away almost effortlessly?

Then we have food. Specifically, the Woolies and Pick n Pay ready-cooked meals that you take home and keep in the fridge. Simply pop in the microwave and re-heat for a hearty meal to satisfy your hunger. How many of us forget to make a hole in the plastic covering beforehand? And then juggle it like literal hot cakes while trying to decide how best to get that pesky bit of plastic off? And then singe our fingers in the steam emitted when we finally manage to part the film from the seal?

My personal favourite is the olive oil, vinegar or liquor bottle with the non-functioning screw-off cap. It turns at first twist, but just keeps on turning and turning and never actually twists off. How many wounds have been self-inflicted when a sharp weapon is applied to the bit of the cap that appears to have missed its thread? The really unfortunate manage to crack/de-stroy the neck of the bottle, and some end up a gooey mess of blood and oil. Shades of Texas Chain-Saw Massacre. Which was a fate almost guaranteed by those cans of food that come with a ring-pull that allow one to pull the lid up and away from the side walls, unfortunately presenting the sharpest edges known to science with a strong likelihood of applying themselves with some force at right angles to a finger or wrist or other unfortunate limb.

An acquaintance says his worst is when the little ring in the funnel of milk or juice cartons – Tetrapacks to the trade – comes away without removing the bit of cardboard or paper or whatever it is that actually forms the seal in the neck under the screw-cap. And I also really hate swimming pool products (almost all of them carrying dire warnings about their lethality and the need to not go spilling them all over oneself that have a similar seal). Hands up anybody who manages to routinely get the contents into the pool without taking a fair dose through skin contact or a sharp intake of breath.

I tried to ask the trade about typical blunders, but got the impression it’s not considered good manners. Retailers were a little more responsive. In response to questions about the ready-cooked meal singeing syndrome, Woolies basically said: “Please read the instructions.” Pick n Pay said basically the same, and that they hadn’t had any customer complaints.

An inquiry on a different topic to a South African packaging company that claims to make the widest range of packing in the world drew a response along the lines that they provide software packages that test the sustainability and strength of certain packs in a virtual space and ensuring the delivery of optimal solutions. I asked if this meant they tested products in the interests of customers not carving themselves up, and the nice PR lady said she would ask the R&D people, but hasn’t come back to me again.

I think my money’s on a mate from my tennis club, a German, who says he knows that the former manager of a famous motor racing driver has an interest in an idea, apparently perfected, for a resealable can. To what end, you may ask? Simply because it can, apparently. And if one beverage maker decides to put its product into such a device, others will have no choice but to follow suit. Except, maybe, for Namibia Breweries.

And the former manager expects to make a lot more money out of his share of the venture than he ever did mentoring racing drivers.