

StePac in time



StePac LA Ltd has made strides in the modified atmosphere packaging sector and, by creating a new sales role in the UK, the Israel-based company has its sights set firmly on growing its UK customer base. Anna Sbuttoni reports

The search for the right packaging is an important one for growers and suppliers around the world and, in the UK, this issue has been talked about more than ever in the last 12 months. Essentially, modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) preserves fresh produce quality as it moves through the supply chain, playing a vital role in extending produce shelf life, reducing the amount of waste and retaining the nutritional value and appearance of fruit and vegetables.

This has formed the basis for the way that Israel-based packaging firm StePac has worked since it was set up in 1992. The business is part of the UK-owned DS Smith Plastics, and specialises in providing post-harvest solutions for fresh produce through its Xtend® modified atmosphere and modified humidity (MA/MH) packaging solutions.

StePac has developed

printed and non-printed Xtend® packaging solutions, aimed at the bulk, foodservice and retail sectors, for more than 50 fresh produce items. The packaging is engineered to create a product-specific modified atmosphere, with the correct balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and to maintain the proper humidity level

inside the bag and allow excess moisture to escape into the environment.

The Israel-based company has a global reach and operates sales and technical support offices in the UK, Europe, North America, Central and South America, Russia, Turkey, South Africa and South East Asia. “Some of these branches

have been operating for numerous years and are well established,” says Assaf Shachnai, director for sales and technical support.

“In order to penetrate any market it is essential to work in close proximity with the companies that use our packaging. The success of the product is highly dependent on the post-harvest process, and we have commercial and technical support working together with our customers to make sure that they obtain maximum packaging performance by handling fresh produce in accordance with our guidelines, and providing them with

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Assaf Shachnai and Gary Ward

advice and support on all issues pertaining to post harvest and logistics. An integrated approach is very important.

“This is one thing that we excel in and that differentiates us from our competitors,” he adds. “We have a wealth of post-harvest know-how that brings significant benefits to our customers.”

The global presence means that StePac can keep up with trends in the industry and relay information to its R&D centre.

StePac is to release a number of innovative products this year, including a novel MAP lidding film for trays, that is individually designed to provide optimum modified atmosphere conditions for preserving the quality of a range of produce items, including sweetcorn, strawberries, green asparagus and cherries, as well as retail MAP packaging for fresh herbs, and MAP zip lock packaging for cherries.

“All of these products exist on the market as simple packaging solutions, but we are now offering them as MAP products,” says Shachnai.

“The novel MAP lidding film has excellent anti-fog properties and has been optimised to provide the optimum modified atmosphere for preserving the quality of each produce item. This is something that we are very enthusiastic about, and we expect this product to have a big impact,” adds Dr Gary



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Ward, technology development director. “The retail MAP packaging for fresh herbs that we have developed prolongs shelf life by up to one week more than regular retail packaging.”

StePac has recruited a new marketing manager for the UK, Rowena Wagner, who will spearhead efforts to further penetrate the market with the new products in mind. “Rowena has been working from the UK for a few months, and it is the first time in the last two years that this role has not been based in Israel,” says Shachnai. “We are aiming for at least 100 per cent sales growth this year in the UK alone.”

The StePac R&D centre in

Israel is made up of an inter-disciplinary team of polymer, microbiology, agronomy and plant physiology scientists, who, together with logistics specialists, are continuously developing new packaging solutions and support services to offer new solutions to customers, staying one step

ahead of the competition.

Some 15 per cent of the total budget is invested in R&D each year, to make sure that each product is custom-made to suit the physiological requirements of the produce item in question.

Environmental impact is now a key consideration in the packaging sector, and this has not been overlooked by the team at StePac and its researchers. Xtend® packaging offers a number of advantages, according to Ward, facilitating land and sea transport as opposed to airfreight, reducing waste in the supply chain and bridging seasonal gaps to expand markets. There is a common misconception of MAP in terms of carbon footprint, he says. “Our

view is that the ever-increasing demand for reducing carbon footprints is paradoxically likely to result in an increased usage in bulk modified atmosphere packaging in the forthcoming years, reducing carbon emissions by facilitating land and sea freight of fresh produce, and decreasing wastage in the supply chain,” says Ward. “Nevertheless, we are also aware of the increased demand for biodegradable consumer packaging, and are in the final stages of qualifying biodegradable films for MAP applications.” The biodegradable film will come on to the market in the first quarter of this year. □



Rowena Wagner