



Tom Hughes



Andy Navarro



## Cans ascendant: Crown execs discuss rise of canned craft

The aluminum beer can is getting new respect, as many fast-growing craft brewers are embracing the package for its cost and quality benefits. Recently, Crown Beverage Packaging North America's **Tom Hughes, marketing manager**, and **Andy Navarro, director of customer technical services**, talked to us about the growing trend of canned craft.

### As yet, craft must be a very small part of your overall can business...

**Tom:** Craft beer can sales are a small part of our business, but an important part. Sales in the craft brewing industry are on the rise. There are at least 1,700 craft breweries across the U.S., and a growing number of brewers are experimenting with alternative packaging formats. Metal is becoming more popular as the industry learns more about the benefits of cans.

Craft brewers are coming out with new and innovative products, and we're very proud that they are considering cans. We can work with them on transitioning to cans, we work with them on the graphics, and we help them meet minimum order

requirements. Andy works with them on technical issues like seaming techniques.

### Why do you think so many craft brewers are choosing cans?

**Tom:** There are number of reasons. Metal packaging is durable enough for active lifestyles, without any concern of breakage. Metal is also sustainable, it is 100 percent and infinitely recyclable, making it a good choice for environmentally-conscious consumers. Beer cans have the highest recycling rate of any package, something around 52%. It just takes 60 days to recycle a can, and making new cans from recycled metal uses 95% less energy than making brand new cans.

**Andy:** But perhaps what is most important, at least to consumers, are the benefits it brings to the quality of the beer. A metal package keeps the beer fresh; it blocks sunlight, preventing the beer from spoiling. Cans are hermetically sealed, and provide probably the best barrier to protect the beer. And besides that, metal cools more rapidly than glass, so you can chill down your beer more quickly.

### How long can beer last in a can? Have you done long-term tests?

**Andy:** Cans provide the best barrier against oxygen and light. There is very little risk of oxygen seeping in. Beer could probably last indefinitely in a can, but the flavor would eventually degrade. The oxygen in the product would eventually begin attacking the liner. We absolutely guarantee cans out to six months, but we've done shelf life studies out to 18 months. Eventually you reach the corrosion limit of the can. The oxygen in the can will react with the aluminum, or any surface area, and the can degrades from there.

### The industry still uses epoxy liners containing BPA, is there any movement towards water-based lining material?

We still use epoxy liners, but under extensive testing these show no absorption into the product. It never reaches a limit standard, five parts per billion, we've never seen that. It's heat that typically extracts BPA out of liners, but most canning breweries are cold filling, so the cans are not

*(Continued on page 9)*

# The ascendance of the can: an interview with Crown execs

*(Continued from page 2)*

exposed to high heat. But we are researching non-BPA liners, and we are working on a water-based liner.

## **Is there any demand among craft brewers for nitrogenation technology?**

**Andy:** Like the Guinness widget? My only reservation would be regarding the size of any widget. No one has asked, but there's no reason it couldn't be done.

## **How about can conditioning, similar to bottle conditioning? Could yeast be injected into a can?**

**Andy:** Nobody has asked about that either. If the pressure rating for a can and bottle are similar, I don't see why not. The only concern regarding secondary growth would be the internal pressure, but it would be interesting to look into.

## **How about new can designs? Can you play around with the basic form of the can, to create something like Sapporo's fluted can?**

**Tom:** We're constantly thinking about new ideas, and doing consumer testing and research. In past years, we worked with Heineken to develop the keg can. That was a Crown/Heineken venture. We worked on the open-end drinking cup can for AmBev. We've also done work on smooth pour technology. We're seeing a lot of movement into specialty cans, larger 16-ounce and 24-ounce cans. Those areas are growing, more than standard 12-ounce cans. I think the interest in specialty cans will only increase. In addition to craft, we're seeing import brands move into cans. Even though the beer market is flat or down, we're seeing a lot of growth in cans.

## **What's the first thing a brewer should consider when transitioning to cans?**

**Tom:** You have to consider the kinds of changes that need to be made to your existing packaging lines and processes. Those changes don't have to be costly or complex, but the first step should still be to consider how your own packaging processes may change.

**Andy:** Absolutely. There is going to be a certain amount of new equipment required for metal packaging. And to reiterate what Tom said, that doesn't mean entry into canning is cost-prohibitive. But, wherever pos-

sible, brewers should look at purchasing expandable equipment. The types of equipment required will depend on individual requirements. Machinery for packaging and handling the cans is obviously a priority. For a brewer looking at canning, we can discuss the different types of filling machinery, speed, design, etc. A key issue brewers face is sealing. If all of the oxygen is not properly removed from the container it can effect the flavor and even lead to leakage. That's why we always work with our customers to make sure they have the right filling and sealing equipment from the start. We teach them how to evaluate a double seam and measure it. The double seam is the double fold in the metal that creates the hermetic seal.

## **A lot of the craft canners started out with hand canning equipment...**

**Andy:** Yes, there are some good systems. You can get automated equipment that runs from 30 cans per minute to 2000 cans per minute. There are a lot of new designs that run on the slower end that would be perfect for smaller brewers, something in the range of 30-150 CPM.

## **For smaller brewers requiring fewer cans, can you adjust minimum orders?**

**Tom:** Sure, for example, if they don't have the storage space for 50 pallets, we can offer 25 pallets, and we can also mix it up, by putting any different labels they might have all together in a 25 pallet load.

## **You mentioned that Crown can assist with can graphics...**

**Tom:** We have a design team that can assist with that. We can tell brewers what is possible, and provide them with templates that they can use to design the can. Graphics should definitely be considered early on in the process. One of the key aspects is the larger surface area of the can, and the capability for really showing off the brand imagery.

Craft beers have distinct styles, and brand personalities. So, for craft brews perhaps more than any other beverage, the graphics associated with a particular beer can be more important than the name. You can certainly achieve a level of artwork and imagery quality on metal cans that is similar to that on printed labels. Some of the differences are purely practical. For example,

cans have a larger surface area than bottles, so designs will need to be reformatted. This added space serves as a billboard of sorts and lets graphics pop more. We come prepared to work through several iterations if necessary to achieve the final design. And we execute trial print runs for approval before going to press.

## **So Crown will partner with the brewer to get things up and running...**

**Andy:** Yes, a brewer should be prepared to work step-by-step through the process with the supplier. That way, the brewer benefits from the supplier's knowledge of the material, which improves the quality of the final package and it also ensures that everyone's expectations and schedules are in sync. Brewers should also try to arrange on-site visits to their supplier's operations.

**Tom:** Early communication with a supplier will help avoid complications down the line. Brewers should talk with their suppliers about order turnaround time, minimum runs, and which periods are considered to be the high season. Discussing these details reduces the likelihood of issues or delays once work begins. A supplier should be prepared to provide an on-site evaluation of a brewer's process and capabilities along with training for any new equipment. This evaluation benefits all the parties involved—it gives brewers the confidence they need in their new product line and it allows suppliers to identify any potential problems early in the process.

This is an ongoing partnership, not a one-off transaction. The supplier should provide contacts for technical support that brewers can communicate with regularly—not just in an emergency. Good technical support is not just about fixing something when it's gone wrong. It's about providing regular guidance on topics that brewers may not be familiar with, such as full can handling, seaming and graphics.

**Andy:** For craft brewers considering transitioning to metal packaging, I think the best strategy is to get the advice of a peer who has gone through the same experience. Suppliers should definitely be an additional resource. They can provide strong counsel on the ins and outs of can-making and provide guidance to make the transition successful and efficient.

**Thanks for your time, guys.**