



Canadian Corrugated and
Containerboard Association
Association canadienne du
cartonnage ondulé et du
carton-caisse

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Supplying the Essential to the Essential

It seems to be commonly agreed that since the outbreak of COVID-19, life has changed drastically. Everyone has had to make sacrifices and compromise for the greater good of humanity. Some companies have had to shut their doors and their employees have been forced to return to remain in their homes. However, some companies cannot just shut down. They are considered essential and without them continuing to operate, society would be unable to function. While many of us think of essential services as those provided by hospitals, support workers and grocery stores, the corrugated packaging industry plays an equally important role in ensuring people's well-being as one of the key organizations in the supply chain. Without this industry, goods could not be packed nor shipped to hospitals, grocery stores and other organizations that need these goods to deliver essential services.

Recently, Mitchel-Lincoln and WestRock, leaders in the corrugated industry and both based in Canada, spoke about their experiences, the challenges they are currently facing and what has been the key to their success during this difficult time.

Both Mitchel-Lincoln and WestRock have been considered to be providing an essential service. Mike Goriani, Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Mitchel Lincoln, talks about the steps the company had to take to protect the workers in order to stay open. As Mr. Goriani explains, "many of our office staff that were able to work from home, did so ... and those who worked on the production line began to wear masks, plastic protective face shields, gloves. All areas were extensively cleaned after use." Mr. Goriani's position is that they simply could not risk the spread of a virus on a shift because one case would not only mean the loss of that entire shift of employees for a minimum of two weeks, but would put many employees' entire families at risk should they become infected. Cleanliness and observing safety precautions is a shared responsibility that all their employees take seriously. Mitchel-Lincoln states, "At Mitchel-Lincoln we have amazing staff and an exceptional environment; we want to make sure we reward our employees for continuing to attend work amidst this pandemic" and offered bonuses for employees. It is because of the leadership provided by these employers and the commitment of employees who recognize the key roles they play in supporting the public good that these essential services can continue to operate.



WestRock had a similar experience in taking the necessary precautions with regard to the safety of their employees. Shannon Brimelow, Sales Manager at WestRock, states that she values their employees for their "resilience", stating that "our employees have gone above and beyond in order to find new ways of adapting and communicating in this new normal."

Both of these organizations have praised their employees for tackling this tough period of time and commend them for their efforts to keep this essential industry functioning at full capacity. While demand for containerboard products would naturally increase due to the volume of online purchasing



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and ordering of products, there have been declines in other parts of the business. James Galdes, Head of Sales for Eastern Canada at WestRock, points out that while, “Our online portion has certainly increased, however we have seen decreases in other aspects such a food service and catering.” Not unlike other essential service industries, the corrugated industry has had to make adjustments and be flexible to the new environment and shifting public demands. Bryan McEachern, Plant Manager at the WestRock Milton Plant agreed with Mr. Galdes’ statement claiming that, “We have felt the impact of online shopping both positively and negatively.” COVID-19 has obviously altered the way people shop and conduct business. This is due in part to people not clearly understanding the spread of the virus and the full impact it has on our economy.



As Bill Desjardins, Production Superintendent in Milton Ontario explains, “the surprise of the virus is how quickly it spread. It’s frightening”. Those industries that are deemed essential must work to collectively anticipate future needs and be sufficiently nimble to respond to the unknowns and unpredictable new demands generated by a medical situation like a pandemic.

And adapting quickly is what both Mitchel-Lincoln and WestRock packaging have done. They provide strong leadership to their organizations, demonstrate care and concern for their employees’ well-being and acknowledge their contributions. By listening to their employees and altering their business models to service new sectors both companies have managed to meet customer demand, stay productive and support their local communities.

Allen Kirkpatrick

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