



**JIM CAUDILL**  
Vice President of Packaging  
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## Connecting Innovation and Sustainability

### A Q&A with Jim Caudill, Vice President of Packaging Innovation at WestRock

Jim Caudill leads a team of WestRock engineers in developing new ways to connect people to products through sustainable innovation in packaging.

As consumer products companies, food and beverage companies, quick-service restaurants and major retailers continue to set big goals for sustainability, packaging innovation is a major lever for them to pull. Replacing plastic with sustainable packaging is a huge priority for many customers, and Jim and his team are splitting their time between customer meetings, the lab and the pilot plant with several exciting sustainable packaging innovations on the horizon.

When we sat down with Jim to discuss his approach to innovation and sustainability, he had just returned from a great sustainable packaging discussion with a customer in Europe. Below is a recap of our conversation.

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**Q: Tell us about your approach to packaging innovation at WestRock.**

**A:** At WestRock, helping our customers win means developing new ways to connect people to products through packaging that enhances relationships between brands and consumers, while also being good for the environment. For us, sustainability and innovation are not discreet priorities—helping our customers meet their sustainability goals and consumers’ expectations of performance is a challenge that requires deep partnership and innovative solutions. At WestRock, we use innovation as a way to drive our differentiation strategy.

**Q: How is your team structured to drive the company’s differentiation strategy?**

**A:** Our group is responsible for innovation across the WestRock packaging businesses, including technical development, plastic replacement and innovation project pipeline tracking. Our team of packaging engineers and product developers is organized by innovation platform, so some of them work on barrier technology—coming up with new ways to make paperboard packaging resistant to water/grease/temperature/ etc. while retaining its recyclability. Others work on high-performance strength—making paperboard packaging as strong and lightweight as possible so customers can be efficient and sustainable. And another group focuses on emerging technologies—exploring the “further out there” big ideas and technologies that could revolutionize our industry and grow WestRock’s portfolio. We try to keep a good balance across all three—recognizing that we have to make time for the big picture stuff but also keep the flywheel turning on the incremental innovation that can make a big, big difference over time.

**Q: We know you guys don't spend all your time in the lab. How do you interact with the rest of the company?**

**A:** Collaboration is an incredibly important part of our approach. Our team is a part of the Global Innovation Network, which includes product developers, designers, materials specialists, and machinery specialists from across the businesses. We get together quarterly to share ideas, resources and inspiration; there is also a training element. We serve as a sort of innovation center of excellence for the company, providing training to improve our skills and effectiveness. We also hold quarterly innovation reviews with the business leaders to make sure we are working on the right things that will deliver value.

A lot of time we think innovation happens in a lab, but the truth is it is driven by connections—with our colleagues and our customers. We enjoy working closely with colleagues from enterprise sales, sustainability, product stewardship and consumer insights. As a chemical engineer with a degree in pulp and paper technology, I can get laser focused on customer problems and have so much respect for the technical talent we have at WestRock. And as someone who has also worked on

growth initiatives and spent time on the customer side, I also enjoy the business aspects of our work, understanding the full context for our development efforts—why they are needed, how they will be used, and how they make money. I also have a lot of respect for the folks in the businesses who make these partnerships possible.

On the innovation team, our philosophy is about solving customer problems and making our products better—sometimes a little bit better and sometimes altogether new and different. It's about what the customer needs. And these days, that's packaging sustainability and performance.

**Q: Tell us more about that—how do you deliver packaging sustainability and performance for customers through innovation?**

**A:** Right now, our customers are facing mounting pressure around sustainability, especially to replace plastic in their packaging. We believe innovative, sustainable paper and packaging solutions are a great answer. We have a multidimensional approach to plastics replacement, to help our customers maintain (and even exceed) performance while increasing their sustainability profile. **Our sustainable packaging framework includes:**

## Our plastics replacement framework



### Innovative materials

Our innovative materials include products like EnShield® Natural Kraft, a grease resistant paperboard for use in bakery and quick-service restaurants, and our recyclable and compostable cup for hot and cold beverages, which we're proud to say just won the NextGen Challenge, sponsored by the NextGen Consortium, a multi-year partnership of foodservice industry leaders. Our innovation goal in these cases is to make a product that performs like plastic, but doesn't have any plastic in it. Our engineers focus on barrier technology, trying to develop a substrate or a coating to perform the function we are after—moisture or grease resistance or heat sealability, while eliminating the plastic.



### Package design

When it comes to package design, we try to think creatively about how to structure the package itself to increase strength, efficiency and sustainability. A good example here is our Cluster-Pak® Beverage Pack, a paperboard wrap for cans or bottles, which we were proud to partner with Diageo in Europe to use to replace shrink wrap for canned beverages.



### Machinery

Another key element of our plastic replacement framework is innovative and flexible machinery—our capabilities in this area are unmatched. From our Combo 1250 Machine for beverage packing to our Meta®Duo for corrugated shipping boxes, and two-piece boxes to ship and display, we can significantly increase efficiency and sustainability for our customers. E-commerce is another incredibly important market, where we are working with customers through our BoxSizer machinery to create the exact right-sized box for every shipment. We are also working on a fiber-based replacement for the plastic bubble mailer.

We are most successful when we are able to work in close partnership with a customer to connect all three of these strategic elements. In these cases, our solution is more differentiated and tougher for the competition to match. **It's the combination of materials science, design, structure and automation that bring the most comprehensive and sustainable solutions.**

**Q: This sounds like a truly holistic approach—what is WestRock’s competitive advantage when it comes to innovation and sustainability?**

**A:** WestRock combines the world’s most comprehensive portfolio of sustainable, fiber-based paper, packaging and promotional retail displays with our industry-leading expertise, insights, and automated packaging systems to provide customized solutions that help our customers win in the marketplace. The WestRock team is really an extension of the customers’ teams, with a strong focus on helping them lower their total cost, sell more products, minimize their risks, and achieve their sustainability goals.

Our innovation capabilities provide another layer of competitive advantage. For us, sustainability isn’t only about what we don’t emit into the environment as a manufacturer, but what we create in partnership with our customers to help them achieve their sustainability objectives and delight their customers in the process.

Our broad portfolio is also a huge advantage—having access to the world’s most comprehensive portfolio of sustainable paper and packaging products is a packaging engineer’s dream. It’s like the best toolbox we could ask for in solving complex customer problems.



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But the thing that is truly differentiating is our people, and the way we work together to integrate all of these advantages to deliver for our customers. For example, we are working with a major fast-moving consumer goods company to help them achieve their 2025 sustainability goals through packaging innovation. It’s because of the great relationship an enterprise sales team member has with this customer that we are able to connect with them and develop solutions—product developer to product developer, working through their challenges, performance requirements, and thinking through testing, machinery and fulfillment. We can make a much bigger difference when we get involved at this stage of the process. It is actually a lot of fun.

Our innovation group is not a think tank that delivers big but impractical ideas. We are a team of engineers and developers fully integrated with our colleagues and customers, bringing all these other insights to the table. Our goal is to deliver innovation that solves customer challenges, and in many cases, it’s about increasing sustainability without sacrificing performance.

We see ourselves as a strategic partner with a pragmatic approach to solving our customers’ problems. When you have the right people around the table, one challenge (like sustainability) can be the solution to another (like innovation). When we remember our goal is to connect people to products, we can not only bring new ideas to the table but also to get them into the market and help our customers win.

