Alumnus Sal Cesario’s climb up the packaging value chain
Those were Sal Cesario’s clearly defined priorities when he set foot on Cal Poly’s campus in 1981. The 6-foot-4-inch offensive tackle gravitated toward the football program, which had just won the Division II national championship the year before. Soon after successfully walking on to the team, Cesario earned a scholarship and began working toward his degree in business administration with a concentration in marketing.

“I did well and had a good GPA, but I was focused on football. After four years as a Mustang, my hope was to make a career out of it,” said the all-American, who graduated in 1986. “Business was barely on the map, let alone packaging.”

At the time, Cesario admits that he was more concerned with his cleats than the box they came in. But after a three-year try in the National Football League came to an end, he headed west for life-changing opportunities in the emerging world of packaging.

The San Jose native returned home to California, where he was offered a job at the Hayward division of Kent Landsberg Corp., one of the nation’s largest distributors for packaging supplies and solutions.

“I started as a sales guy in the Bay Area, as green as could be.” Cesario described his formative years as pure business development. He soon found his footing in Silicon Valley, appealing to thriving technology companies like IBM and Hewlett Packard.

With no formal training to speak of, he relied heavily on the resourcefulness and work ethic that Cal Poly’s Learn by Doing philosophy instilled in him. “I started to recognize the number of opportunities there were to differentiate myself by being creative, by coming up with a better mousetrap, by reducing the materials in something.” Cesario said he shadowed Landsberg’s lead designer. The insight gave him leverage as he connected with new clients to address their packaging needs.

After seven years, Cesario led the charge to broaden Landsberg’s reach into the Pacific Northwest, otherwise known as the “Silicon Forest.”

“All you had to do was go east of Portland to the Hillsboro area, and you had all the big players out there — HP, Epson, Fujitsu.” Cesario and one teammate moved north to set up an office and build a list of clients based on the wealth of technology packaging experience they had.

Cesario quickly sensed major shifts in the world of manufacturing; the opportunities that were ahead did not reside in electronics.

“Those places were closing down, taking business offshore, moving manufacturing, moving to contractors,” he said. By 2005, he could see domestic packaging’s days were numbered, and the most potential for growth lay overseas.

Armed with his design-savvy sales approach, Cesario made the move to PACCESS, a global packaging service firm that sourced materials and provided packaging optimization for manufacturers in Asia. Soon he was leading a global sales team working with footwear mainstays like Nike and Adidas.

It was at PACCESS that Cesario was presented with his biggest break: helping sportswear’s newest brand, Under Armour, unveil its first shoe line. The anticipation was swirling around what the shoe itself would look like, given Under Armour’s avant-garde style. Cesario decided the packaging shouldn’t get in the way of that curiosity. So he designed, tested
and even patented a protective thermoformed plastic concept that would give birth to the first-of-its-kind transparent retail shoebox.

“They had commercials on TV during the Super Bowl, all featuring the box,” Cesario recalled. “They had a billboard in New York that was made to look like the shoebox that I had developed and designed for them. It was really cool.”

Cesario’s success continued, affording him the opportunity to optimize packaging for Gap, which was facing problems with its supply chain. The retailer was manufacturing much of its apparel in Asia, but inefficient packaging systems resulted in Gap shipping more air and cardboard and less clothing back to the States.

“They had been getting less than a 70 percent container efficiency because these ultra thick boxes didn’t fit very well.” Cesario implemented a new single-walled box in three sizes. Instantly these boxes fit more efficiently into a container and allowed Gap to move more product per shipment with less materials. The results? Massive savings.

“The boxes that we designed reached more than 95 percent efficiency in the container. If you start to do the math on how many units they ship, it’s enormous. It equated to millions of dollars in freight savings every year.”

Cesario says that the next frontier in packaging is all about packaging value chain, which weaves Under Armour-style creativity with Gap-style optimization. Professionals embracing the shift, including Cesario, look at all ways to maximize value, efficiency, branding and product safety in the journeys the products take around the globe.

Cesario has now taken the lead of global sales and marketing for Micro-Pak Ltd., an innovative supply chain player creating antimicrobial stickers and sheets to prevent mold in product containers. Mold is a major threat to the successful shipment of more than just food. Apparel, accessories and luggage in damp shipping containers that take up to 45 days to cross an ocean risk mold as well. Instead of trying to control inevitable moisture, Micro-Pak’s product disinfects the atmosphere inside the package, killing mold spores and ensuring a usable product reaches the consumer.

“I started thinking, ‘This is an infinite opportunity,’” he said. “Everyone that makes a product in Asia needs this.”

While Cesario had no formal training, collegiate packaging programs today educate packaging engineers, materials scientists, marketing managers and logistics leads for success in the $450 billion industry. Cal Poly has asserted itself as one of the nation’s best in the field with its packaging program uniquely housed in the Orfalea College of Business. Today Cal Poly remains an outpost for packaging expertise on the West Coast, building strong relationships with major employers and ensuring a nearly 100 percent placement rate for its graduates.

“The fact that my school is a player in the business that I will have a long career in is awesome,” remarked the proud alumnus. “For me to be able to wear a Cal Poly Packaging shirt is as cool as donning the Mustang logo.” Cesario now sits on Orfalea’s Packaging Advisory Board as it plans for a major growth spurt.

Under the leadership of Director and Professor Jay Singh, the Orfalea College of Business looks to establish a Center for Packaging Value Chain in the coming years. The center will house everything, including a reinvigorated packaging master’s program, a research consortium, professional development programs, and industry partnerships. As an industry veteran, Cesario thinks this move is essential to staying on track with where the discipline is headed.

Now nearly 30 years into a career in packaging, Cesario has never been more passionate about his job. And maybe one day, he’ll get back to his first passion: football.

“At some point I may retire from packaging and try something new I may be really good at, which is coaching football. But that will be something that I do later,” Cesario said. “When it comes to packaging, I’m a lifer.”

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— Sal Cesario, Global Sales and Marketing Manager at Micro-Pak Ltd.