

Federation's founding father returns with pledge to defend industry in hour of need

In a frank interview with *Packaging News*, Dick Searle, the new chief executive of the Packaging Federation, tells Gordon Carson how he will use passion and knowledge to stand up for the industry

At a time when packaging is under fire like never before, it may have found the perfect defender in Dick Searle.

"I don't like to use that word because in a sense I should be a promoter," he says. "But the reality is we are already under scrutiny and attack."

His all-consuming passion for the industry is evident throughout this major interview, which he gave to *Packaging News* as he prepared to officially take over from Ian Dent as chief executive of the Packaging Federation at the start of January.

Dent says Searle was "miles ahead" of any other candidates for the role in his depth of knowledge and experience of the industry. This, coupled with his boundless enthusiasm, made him a perfect successor to take the federation to the next level.

Searle describes himself "first and foremost" as a "crusader" for packaging and says: "I shall be vocal, and I shall back it up with as broad a knowledge of the packaging industry as anyone has."

A lifetime in packaging

Searle's 30-plus years in the industry included spells working with most packaging materials, and he was also one of the founders of the Packaging Federation. Employed by some of packaging's biggest names, such as Metal Box and Blagden Industries, he was latterly executive chairman of Britton Group (Holdings) from 2000 to as recent as 2004.

Since then he has chaired his family owned property business, Searle Estates, but has come out of retirement to take the Packaging Federation role because of his passion for the industry.

To counter attacks on packaging, Searle's first action point is to promote a greater understanding of its role in society.

"Packaging is a service," he says. "We work in a service industry that uses manufacturing as part of the service. We design it in accordance with perceived or stated customer demands. We don't often go out and generate it as a good idea then try to find a market for it." He is concerned that the packaging industry's customers, particularly retailers, "step back from the debate" whenever packaging is



Dick Searle: "Governments don't understand industry and should keep out of it."

attacked, and says it is "about time the whole supply chain stood shoulder to shoulder and defended packaging".

He adds: "There's so much uninformed comment about packaging. If we talk about sustainability we need to start talking about the extent to which packaging is an integral part of sustainability in the food chain. Packaging is one of the reasons we have low food wastage in this country."

Sound science

This links to another of the key issues he has identified, the "appliance of science" in packaging. "We need to bring some sound science to some of the statements being made [on the environment]," he says.

The lack of joined-up thinking among legislators is another of Searle's bug bears. Here he cites two examples: Reach, the proposed European Union regulations on chemical registration,

which have "consistently failed to answer questions on recycling"; and the "complete mismatch" between local authority recycling targets and the way they are remunerated for dealing with waste. He's also concerned about the implications of the drive to reduce carbon emissions, suggesting that the UK's willingness to set tough targets and legislation will damage industry's ability to compete with emerging economies that have less stringent controls.

"The more we laden legislation and cost on UK industry, the more we see our manufacturing exported," he says.

Sceptic of government intervention

Searle's enthusiasm for packaging is coupled with an obvious disdain for the government's record on manufacturing, on which he expresses one of his more forthright opinions: "I'm very sceptical about the role of government in the broadest possible terms in industry. They don't understand it and should keep out of it."

Searle is also worried about energy supply, saying there will be a "substantial generating gap" in the UK in the next few years because some coal-fired power stations do not meet European legislation and will have to close. "If pensioners are freezing, they will switch off supply to factories," he warns.

Searle plans to use a number of channels, including trade publications, national media and, despite his scepticism about their role, direct contact with government ministers and MPs, to get his messages across. Building relationships with retailers will also be key, he says. "They are powerful, influential, and their contribution as they would see it is keeping inflation low."

However, he is also clear that the Packaging Federation will stand up for companies that feel retailers are abusing their power. The voluntary Supermarket Code of Conduct is "lacking in teeth, ill defined and woolly", he says. Although the Competition Commission is investigating the grocery market, it is still a problem "to get people to put their head above the parapet [to complain]".

He adds: "If you examine the supply chain and the levels of profitability at various levels, the retail end has a hell of a lot more than we do." ■

A FULL LIFE

Outside a highly successful career in packaging, Dick Searle has enjoyed a variety of pursuits:

- He was a Class 1 football referee and enjoys skiing
- He was one of the first people to receive the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award, in 1963
- He was one of the founders of the Packaging Federation
- He also spent four years managing the "massively unsuccessful" Canterbury Crusaders speedway team in the national league during the 1980s