

From idea to market: How co-packers turn ambition into reality

From concept to shelf, the BCMPA's Pitch the Co-Packers Final at Packaging Innovations & Empack 2026 shows how the UK's contract packing specialists turn entrepreneurial ambition into market-ready reality.

For all the talk of disruption, innovation and challenger brands, one truth remains constant: no great product makes it to market alone. Behind every fast-growing food, drink, beauty or wellness brand sits a complex web of production, packaging, compliance and logistics - and increasingly, it's contract packers who make the difference between a good idea and a scalable business.

While established FMCG players remain central to the industry, growing momentum around founder-led brands is reshaping the model, bringing new perspectives on agility, purpose, and innovation. Many of today's entrepreneurs are fluent in branding, marketing and storytelling, but far less experienced in the realities of manufacturing, regulation and scale. Running a production line, navigating minimum order quantities, responding to labour shortages or keeping pace with incoming regulations like EPR can quickly turn ambition into overload. This is where co-packers step in - not simply as suppliers, but as partners, problem-solvers and accelerators of growth.

At the heart of Packaging Innovations & Empack 2026 - the UK's leading packaging and processing trade event, attracting over 7,400 visitors, 450 suppliers, 80 speakers, and 3,000 brands - the BCMPA's "Pitch the Co-Packers" Finalist panel gives ambitious start-ups a unique opportunity to connect directly with the UK's top contract packing, manufacturing and fulfilment specialists. The finalists will be able to hear live feedback from the judges, providing them with a practical bridge between ideas and execution, where founders can pitch live, engage in open discussions, receive expert feedback, and start conversations that could shape the future of their brands.

As the packaging and manufacturing landscape evolves, the conversation is no longer just about scale, efficiency or volume. It's about who the industry is building for next. Alongside established FMCG brands and major retailers, a new generation of founder-led businesses is emerging - ambitious, brand-savvy and fast-moving, but often navigating production for the first time. According to Emma Verkaik, CEO of BCMPA, this shift demands a different way of thinking about collaboration, capability and the role of the co-packer in turning ideas into viable, market-ready products.

"The Pitch the Co-Packers Competition initiative is a way of engaging with another set of new customers who are emerging as the market changes. There is a new breed of single entrepreneurs. That audience may be quite strong in marketing, but less so in production and expertise. So, the day-to-day challenges of running your own production line or scaling up can be eased by third parties. But more than that, BCMPA members offer so much expertise to be tapped into. This really

helps new brands accelerate their future and avoid the pitfalls other brands have experienced. They can capitalise on that.

“They can take a quicker route, but it really is all about collaboration. I moderated a speaker panel last year at Packaging Innovations & Empack on the supply chain stage with Rob Smith from Arrowtown Drinks, who said at one point that he thought he could do it all. He was driving around in a car with the product, but there was no time to do anything else. Once he realised that to move forward, he would need help with the day-to-day operational part of the business, he set about finding the right outsourcing partner - the right fit. The Contract Pack & Fulfilment Zone at Packaging Innovations & Empack offers a good spectrum of choice, and people can come and meet real contract manufacturers, packers and fulfilment companies who can help them take their products to market.”

Why personal connections and expert partners drive brand success

For all the digital tools now available to brands, there remains no substitute for face-to-face conversation, especially at a moment when the complexity of bringing products to market is only increasing. As regulations tighten and operational pressures grow, the value of direct access to experience, insight, and trusted partners is becoming clearer than ever.

“The show is vital for that because it facilitates all those exciting conversations and gives visitors the ability to meet people,” says Emma. “Visitors to the show can actually gain that trust and confidence in a supplier and be able to ask pertinent questions. If people can't find what they're looking for at the show, we'll be on hand to point them to an experienced partner who can show them the ropes.

“I think also it's worth mentioning that 3rd party co-packers provide so much more and are custodians of their customers' brands. As we enter a once-in-a-lifetime shift in Packaging Regulations through Extended Producer Responsibility, the ability to document and understand the effects of packaging decisions is paramount to the future of many brands. We recently held a webinar on EPR with our members, and it had the largest attendance of any of our webinars. These new compliance and regulatory requirements are really beginning to make a third party super important for collating the relevant information - and helping their customers to make better or different decisions. There will be many younger brands that won't have the time to do that, and if they do, they won't be doing anything else. Partnering with somebody who can do that is key.”

Scaling a brand is never straightforward, particularly when it comes to production. For emerging entrepreneurs, the day-to-day demands of running a production line can quickly turn them into “a jack of all trades and a master of none.” Labour challenges, seasonal peaks, and the complexity of managing multiple processes all add up. “The old problems of staffing and labour, especially this time of year when it's difficult to ramp up production, are also areas where a third party will make a difference,” Emma adds. Contract packers, with their breadth of experience across projects and sectors, are uniquely positioned to fill this gap. They provide not only operational support but also the insights that help new brands avoid common pitfalls and accelerate their journey to market.

The BCMPA plays a central role in connecting brands with the right partners and setting expectations for collaboration. “It's important for young brands to present themselves in a certain way. In particular, around the conversation on MOQ. Young brands need a sensible approach; it is not cost-effective for anyone to produce 100 items... There has to be something in it for everyone.” Confidence matters - in a brand and its approach to partnerships. While smaller minimum order quantities (MOQs) are sometimes necessary, they should be balanced with professionalism and an



understanding of what it takes to produce at scale. The BCMPA's membership reflects this flexibility: some members can handle start-ups producing 10,000 units, while others specialise in niche runs, such as 2,000 mixed units of a cosmetic face wash. These thresholds are tied to practical realities, including machinery clean-downs and post-production testing, which are unavoidable fixed costs.

Production itself is a staged process, moving from kitchen-scale setups to semi-automatic machines, and ultimately to larger systems where efficiency improves significantly. Alongside this, the guidance and advice of experienced manufacturers are invaluable. "Sometimes a customer might say, 'this is how I want it' because that's the only example they've thought of. Someone else might say you can make it cheaper if you do it this way, and all of a sudden, things change," Emma continues. Contract packers are solution providers, helping brands balance cost, compliance, and operational hurdles while staying true to their product vision.

Connecting expertise with opportunity

In 2025, the BCMPA launched an associate membership programme. The collaborative services and expertise offered by Associate Members have worked out really well, offering an adjunct to its core activities. Associate members provide BCMPA members with crucial market intelligence and insights - a valuable resource for businesses that are already stretched for time and capacity.

"With many SME's being the backbone of the Association, it is important to bring information to these busy BCMPA Members," says Emma. "The upcoming 2026 BCMPA Conference promises to be an exciting one, with Associate Members and sponsors providing a focal point for learning, networking, and exploring new opportunities with top-tier speakers and sponsors. "Since I have taken over the role of CEO at the BCMPA, my focus has been on building a much larger, more connected community, creating spaces where knowledge can be shared and where the sector can continually improve."

The BCMPA's reach spans nine different sectors, each with its own nuances, while common issues such as labour, costs, and EPR weave through them all. Food and drink continue to dominate, personal care thrives on influencer-driven innovation, and the drinks category - nutraceuticals - is buzzing with new ideas. Across all these markets, the insight and adaptability of contract manufacturers and packers are essential, transforming entrepreneurial ambition into market-ready reality.

"The umbrella word that covers everything is outsourcing," she continues, acknowledging the complexity of selling services versus products, particularly when offering multiple solutions across diverse sectors. "That's why the BCMPA prioritises engagement, ensuring a friendly presence at the Contract Pack & Fulfilment Show on the BCMPA Hospitality stand, which allows visitors to have meaningful conversations. Many visitors arrive unsure of exactly what they need, and the association acts as a guide: helping find the right members for niche requests, connecting them to third-party sourcing solutions, or providing technical advice on machinery and processes."

The sector itself has evolved. Where once relationships were largely transactional, asking "can you do it for half a penny cheaper?" the emphasis is now on partnership and long-term value. "If you find a really good contract packer offering the service level you want, why would you change? The wider packaging industry is beginning to recognise how integral co-packers and third-party logistics are, particularly in building lower-carbon, more resilient supply chains."



That shift is reflected in the topics dominating industry gatherings such as Packaging Innovations & Empack 2026, taking place on February 11 and 12 at Birmingham's NEC. EPR, cyber security, and digitalisation are reshaping procurement and operational decision-making. "While fully automated humanoid robots remain the stuff of sci-fi, incremental technological improvements are increasingly working alongside human expertise, a crucial combination given ongoing labour shortages. In a market shaped by disruption, from COVID and global supply bottlenecks to sudden influencer-driven demand spikes, flexibility has become a defining strength of UK contract manufacturers."

Through it all, the BCMPA continues to build a connected, knowledgeable community - one that supports members in navigating regulation, operational complexity, and market opportunity. By fostering collaboration, sharing expertise, and promoting the strategic value of outsourcing, the association ensures that UK contract manufacturing remains not just a service but a cornerstone of innovation, resilience, and growth.

Discover the future of the Contract Pack and Fulfilment Industry at Packaging Innovations & Empack 2026. Don't miss the chance to meet BCMPA members, explore innovative solutions, and gain expert insights into the evolving world of contract manufacturing and co-packing. Join us on February 11 & 12 at Birmingham's NEC to connect with the right partners, learn from industry leaders, and see how collaboration and expertise can help your brand thrive. Register today and take the next step in scaling your business with confidence.

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