



The Search for Flexible and Sustainable Packaging Solutions

Pack Expo International 2026 aims to tackle operational challenges

Matthew Jaster, Director, Editorial Content

Pack Expo International 2026 features the latest in automation, sustainability, digitalization and food safety for packaging and processing.
(Image: PMMI)

With sustainability now shaping equipment specifications, material selection, and operational decisions across packaging and processing, Pack Expo International 2026 will give manufacturers a one-stop destination to compare sustainable packaging technologies, learn from experts, and find solutions that support measurable environmental and business goals. The need is clear: more than 82 percent of end users say they are actively engaged in sustainability adoption, according to “2026 The Ripple Effect: CPG Sustainability and the New OEM Spec Sheet,” a new report from PMMI, The Association for Packaging and Processing Technologies.

“Manufacturers have moved beyond asking whether sustainability matters; they are now determining which investments can deliver measurable environmental and operational results,” says Jim Pittas, president and CEO of PMMI. “That’s why Pack Expo International 2026 gives them one place to compare technologies in operation, learn from experts, and identify practical solutions for their businesses.”

Taking place Oct. 18–21 at McCormick Place in Chicago, Pack Expo International 2026 will feature 2,600 exhibitors and 48,000 attendees from 40-plus vertical markets. As the largest and most influential packaging and processing trade show in North America, the event gives attendees

unmatched access to machinery, materials, automation, and sustainability-focused solutions in action.

Key sustainability-focused destinations and tools at Pack Expo International 2026 include:

Innovation Stages—Three stages will feature fast-paced, 30-minute sessions led by suppliers and technical experts, offering practical insights into the latest advances in packaging machinery, materials, automation, digital tools and real-world applications. Sustainability-focused sessions include:

- Sustainable Load Stability: Reducing Plastic Without Sacrificing Performance
- Packaging Sustainability Myth Busters: Beliefs that Brands Still Get Wrong
- Navigating EPR: Source Reduction Strategies and the Levers Brand Owners Can Pull in Flexible Packaging
- Flexible Packaging That WOWs Consumers: Material That Excites, Surprises, and Delights

Additional features include:

Sustainability Central—Presented by *Packaging World* and sponsored by EFP LLC, this dedicated education hub will feature expert-led presentations, case studies and trends shaping sustainable packaging. Attendees will learn how material choices, system design and

operational changes can reduce environmental impact while supporting business goals.

Thought leaders and innovators will share strategies to help attendees improve recyclability, advance circularity, reduce environmental impact, and stay ahead of customer and regulatory demands. Sessions include:

- Design for Recyclability is Required by Law. Are You Ready?
- Advancing the Circular Economy: How Collaboration Delivers Value
- Protect the Product, Reduce the Footprint
- 2026: The Year EPR Stopped Being Optional

Reusable Packaging Learning Center, sponsored by the Reusable Packaging Association (RPA)—This educational stage gives attendees a practical look at how reusable packaging systems are being implemented across supply chains. Session topics include the State of the Industry 2026, technology AI & leveraging Data, public policy and retail automation.

Reusable Packaging Pavilion, sponsored by the Reusable Packaging Association (RPA)—Here, show attendees can explore reusable packaging systems from members of RPA and uncover solutions designed to reduce waste, improve durability, streamline logistics, and deliver measurable supply chain cost savings.

Sustainability Solutions Finder—This online tool helps attendees locate vetted PACK EXPO Green Exhibitors that offer eco-friendly materials, components, machinery and services. Attendees can search by sustainability attribute, package type or solution category.



Pack Expo International features more than 2,600 exhibitors and a comprehensive educational program to stay ahead with the latest packaging trends and new product technologies. (Image: PMMI)

Showcase of Packaging Innovations, sponsored by Smurfit Westrock—This special show-floor display features award-winning packaging designs from around the world, including formats that push the boundaries of sustainability, recyclability and material efficiency.

In addition, Dow is the official sustainability partner and sponsor of show-floor recycling. Dual-stream recycling and trash bins will be placed throughout every exhibit hall.

“Achieving sustainability goals requires more than a single material or technology; it takes a systems-level approach,” Pittas says. “Pack Expo International gives manufacturers the opportunity to see how packaging design, equipment, reusable systems and operational improvements can work together to reduce environmental impact while strengthening performance and long-term competitiveness.”

Exhibitor Previews

Kuka Robotics Demonstrates Automated Packaging and Food Manufacturing at Pack Expo 2026

Kuka Robotics will highlight its advanced automation solutions for various packaging operations and food manufacturing applications at Pack Expo 2026. In Booth #N-5530, the company will feature live demonstration cells that represent real-world applications in collaboration with its System Partners: the Compendium Group, FOCUS Integration and Acieta. Kuka will also have an interactive podium for visitors to experience the company's LBR iiwa cobot together with the advanced iiQKA. OS2 robot operating system.

Kuka System Partner Compendium Group will demonstrate robotic case erecting with two compact KR Agilus six-axis robots. Working in tandem, one robot holds a carton while the second robot loads a cardboard insert, showcasing fast, precise handling for high-speed packaging operations. Compendium programmed the cell using *KUKA.PLC mxAutomation* programming software, which enables intuitive robot programming directly within the PLC environment to simplify integration, accelerate commissioning and provide greater flexibility.

As a universal PLCopen-certified PLC interface, *KUKA.PLC mxAutomation* allows users to program and operate all key robot functions directly in their familiar control environment. Not only are commands sent to the robot, diagnostics and status information flow back to the controller.



The CUBE robotic palletizing and depalletizing cell will be featured at Pack Expo International in Chicago. (Image: Kuka Robotics)

In a material handling application, Kuka System Partner FOCUS Integration will feature its double-sided CUBE robotic palletizing and depalletizing cell equipped with a KR Iontec industrial robot and a KMP 1500P autonomous mobile robot (AMR) that transports pallets for a seamless automated workflow. The double-sided configuration enables uninterrupted production and higher throughput by autonomously removing completed pallets while allowing palletizing to continue on the opposite side. The cell incorporates Kuka's iiQKA.OS2 operating system, KR C5-2 controller and *iiQWorks.Sim* simulation software.

The iiQKA.OS2 operating system is scalable, customizable and includes a complete virtual robot controller (VRC). Because it's AI-capable, the controller allows users to meet new ISO 10218:2025 and cyber-resilient needs for future-proof digital manufacturing.

The Kuka robot controller system KR C5-2 enables tailored controller solutions for a wide range of applications involving industrial robots and additional kinematic systems. The custom-fit combination of controller modules, interface modules, peripheral modules, and a scalable cabinet system allows for integration into diverse automation environments.

With *iiQWorks.Sim*, FOCUS programmed, tested and optimized the cell's Kuka industrial robots offline before deployment. The simulation software supports robot simulation, process validation and virtual commissioning to reduce risk, improve efficiency, and accelerate project implementation. All without interrupting ongoing production.

For case blank loading in packaging applications, the Acieta cell demonstration incorporates a KR20 R1820 robot from Kuka's KR Cybertech series. The robot offers a compact design for high integration density and reduced interference contours. In this application, the KR Cybertech will remove straps from bundles of flattened boxes then loads the boxes into the magazine of a case erector.

As an interactive experience at Pack Expo 2026, Kuka will display its LBR iisy cobot together with the company's iiQKA.OS2 operating system. The LBR iisy is highly versatile, intuitive to operate, and reliable for working in contact with humans. Applicable to all production areas, it combines the know-how of industrial automation with the flexibility and simplicity of an intelligent tool, paired with the speed of a traditional industrial robot.

The iiQKA.OS2 incorporates a modern user interface and modular safety while enabling the simulation of multiple robots and their peripherals. Backed by decades of Kuka development experience, the operating system incorporates the latest web technologies for expanded functionality, enhanced user experience, and streamlined workflows. It can also detect errors at an early stage due to its various engineering functions such as simulation, offline programming, and comprehensive tests in a virtual environment, all of which drastically reduces risk and overall cost.

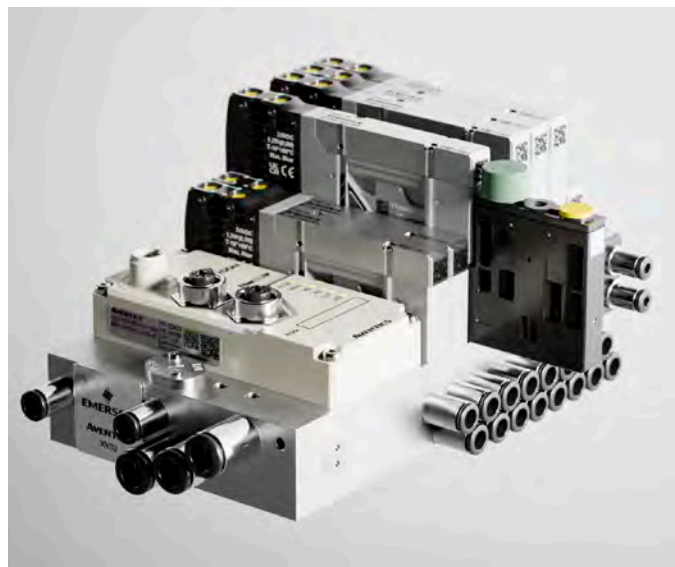
As a featured speaker at the Pack Expo 2026 Innovation Stage 1 (N-4570), Kuka Account Manager, Mobile Robotics, Brendan Turner will discuss how autonomous mobile robots (AMRs) are being rapidly adopted across warehousing and manufacturing, but that successful automation requires far more than deploying the right mobile robots. In his "From Napkin Sketch to Lights-Out Logistics: Building Autonomous Material Handling Systems," presentation—scheduled for Tuesday, October 20 at 10 a.m.—Turner will focus on what it takes to implement a fully autonomous material handling solution in real-world production and distribution environments, along with key considerations behind designing a turn-key system.

Attendees will learn about the essential components of a successful "lights-out" operation, including AMR fleet management, interfacing with physical equipment, and the software infrastructure that ties systems together. Using examples from food and beverage to demanding automotive manufacturing, Kuka's presentation will demonstrate how automation concepts are developed into scalable, operational solutions on the plant floor. The session will also address planning mixed fleets using VDA 5050 standards, helping manufacturers prepare for the next generation of flexible automation through collaboration between robotics providers, software developers and system integration partners.

my.kuka.com

Emerson Highlights Comprehensive Portfolio

Emerson will exhibit its packaging solutions in the North Building, Booth #N-5449 where visitors can view highlights from the comprehensive Emerson portfolio and product demonstrations from Emerson's packaging automation experts.



The XV Valve Series will be one of the key product technologies at the Emerson booth during Pack Expo International. (Image: Aventics)

The Aventics XV Valve Series pneumatic valves are designed with interoperability in mind to provide machine builders in the food and packaging industry with a flexible and cost-effective valve platform. The valves provide higher flow rates in a compact valve package that enables more efficient and flexible pneumatic system performance for factory automation and food and packaging applications. This helps manufacturers boost productivity and allows them to offer products customized for specific markets and customer preferences.

emerson.com/en/corporate

Bosch Rexroth Offers Complete Factory Automation Solutions

Few industries face the kind of complex, constantly shifting trends and customer preferences that consumer packaged goods (CPG) manufacturers deal with daily. CPG companies prioritize solutions to manufacturing challenges such as supply chain transparency, digital transformation and production line flexibility.

Rexroth will display automation product technologies and solutions for the packaging industry in Booth #S-1654 at Pack Expo 2026.

Bosch Rexroth has the industry's most complete factory automation solutions engineered to meet the unique needs of CPG manufacturers. At Pack Expo, attendees will be able to experience this for themselves and interact with a selection of exhibits from Bosch Rexroth's various technology groups, as well as speak one-on-one with product experts on the latest advancements in automation technology.

Bosch Rexroth offers the critical automation technology packaging OEMs and manufacturers depend on—controls and drive, conveyance, assembly and more fully integrated into complete automation platforms that advance CPG productivity and flexibility.

Highlights will include the latest version of ctrlX Automation, eliminating the classic boundaries between machine controls, the IT world and the Internet of Things. With the real-time capable operating system Linux, consistently open standards, app programming technology, web-based engineering and a comprehensive IoT connection, ctrlX Automation reduces components and engineering costs by 30 to 50 percent.

The consumer packaged goods (CPG) industry is undergoing rapid change. Considerable competitive pressure requires methods to increase productivity—while maintaining high quality standards. At the same time, CPG manufacturers are challenged with having more flexible processes to adapt to the pace of change in the market.

With the ctrlX FLOW product family, Bosch Rexroth offers easy-to-integrate solutions for optimal and highly efficient material and goods flows. As a linear motion system, ctrlX FLOWHS brings flexibility and high speed to manufacturing. The space-saving high-speed system can be flexibly configured for different topologies and, consequently, a wide range of applications.



Bosch Rexroth will feature several technologies in areas like controls, drives, conveyance and assembly on the Pack Expo International show floor. (Image: Bosch Rexroth)

Individual, space-saving and flexibly expandable solutions are more important than ever in mechanical engineering as is a fast time to market. ctrlX DRIVE is an important enabler. The servo drive requires very little installation space, enabling companies to quickly implement economical solutions that are precisely tailored to their specific needs. The drive systems grow alongside the requirements: from cost-effective entry-level versions to high-end applications. The open system architecture offers maximum freedom and allows scaling without architectural breaks.

boschrexroth.com/en/us

SEW-Eurodrive Brings Drives, Motion Control and Automation Solutions to Pack Expo

Design, build and optimize food, beverage, and packaging equipment, machines, and systems with integrated drive technology, motion control, and automation from SEW-Eurodrive at Booth #S-3783. From hygienic processing and packaging machines to conveyors, palletizers and warehouse logistics, their scalable solutions help OEMs and end users improve reliability, efficiency and uptime.

Highlights include hygienic gearmotors with acid- and alkali-resistant surfaces for washdown applications. These are available in helical, bevel and Spiroplan right-angle designs for reliable, cool-running performance.

Movimot performance ELV delivers high-efficiency, extra-low voltage motion control for safer, decentralized conveyor, packaging and shuttle systems.

CM3C.. medium-inertia synchronous servomotors provide high-torque, precise motion for heavy-load applications, while CM2H.. stainless steel servomotors deliver hygienic, corrosion-resistant performance for washdown environments.

More flexibility in production, modularized systems, Industry 4.0, energy-efficient drive technology, decentralized automation structures, frequency converters directly on the drive—decentralized electrical drive technology is and can do all this and more. But how exactly, why and when is a decentralized approach to drives and automation worthwhile?



The PxG economy series is designed for applications with low to medium technical requirements. Typical uses include packaging equipment, assembly machinery, material handling systems, carton erectors, gantry robots and machine tool portals. (Image: SEW-Eurodrive)

Many machines and systems are controlled centrally from a control cabinet. This control cabinet contains controllers, frequency inverters, power supply, safety devices and much more. But, control cabinet space is expensive. The larger a machine or system becomes, the larger the control cabinets become, and the more complex the changes in the system can be.

With a decentralized concept, many functions migrate from the control cabinet to the system or machine—close to the places where, for example, controllers or inverters are also required. The system can be configured and tested in a modular manner, the cabling effort in the control cabinet is reduced massively, and energy efficiency is increased. Components such as the Moviswitch gearmotor with motor starter fit into decentralized drive technology.

Lastly, the PxG economy planetary servo gear units provide a cost-effective solution for industrial automation and motion control. Available in performance classes P1 to P3, these planetary servo gear units deliver reliable performance and efficient operation for applications requiring moderate precision, torque, and power density.

seweurodrive.com

The Flexibility Factor

AI and automation will become standard across packaging and material handling in the future. As reported in *PTE's* Pack Expo East analysis from Siemens Digital Industries Software earlier this year, manufacturers will increasingly simulate and optimize production before implementing changes physically. AI will help predict issues, optimize performance, and guide operational decisions in real time. Robotics will become more flexible and easier to deploy, enabling faster adaptation to new packaging requirements. These technologies will enable manufacturers to operate with greater agility, efficiency and resilience.

According to *roboticscenter.com*, we've moved on from experimentation to infrastructure. AMRs (autonomous mobile robots) are outpacing older AGV technology because they navigate dynamically instead of following fixed paths—AMRs now outsell AGVs roughly 3-to-1

in new deployments and remain the fastest-growing robotics segment at around 35 percent. AS/RS (automated storage and retrieval) systems are being paired with this for dense vertical storage, which matters a lot as warehouse real estate gets more expensive.

The MTLI Group reports that historically, robotics investment went almost entirely into outbound picking and fulfillment. That's changing today as receiving and putaway concepts have stayed largely manual and become the bottleneck limiting throughput no matter how efficient downstream operations are, so 2026 is seeing real investment in robotic depalletizers and AI vision inspection for inbound work.

Robotics-as-a-Service is letting companies rent rather than capitalize automation—ABI Research expects roughly 1.3 million RaaS installations by the end of 2026, letting facilities scale automation up or down without heavy upfront spend. This matters especially for midsize operators who couldn't previously justify huge spends (as reported by Olimp Warehousing).

Olimp also cites Warehouse Execution Systems as the "central nervous system" unifying robots, conveyors and AS/RS, with digital twins increasingly used to simulate layouts before physical implementation. Industry framing has shifted accordingly—one analysis put it as: the buying question in 2026 isn't which robot to purchase, it's who owns the core technology and is accountable for how the whole system performs.

So, what's the throughline for both packaging and material handling in 2026? Both segments are being forced to do more with less. This means less cheap labor, less tolerance for waste (regulatory and reputational), and less room to just build bigger buildings. By 2030, the consensus is packaging will be simpler in material composition but carry much more data. Many warehouses will be automated end-to-end from receiving to shipping rather than just at the picking stage. We've also reached the point where the software controlling the robots is just as vital as the robots themselves.

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PTE

