

Export packaging problem

PACKAGING
RONAH
NAHABWE

Why good products still fail abroad

Ugandan manufacturers returned from the Gulf Food Expo in Dubai early this year with something many local businesses rarely achieve: strong international buyer interest and a potential export pipeline worth more than \$5.8 million.

But behind the excitement was a familiar frustration. Much of that interest did not immediately translate into firm contracts because many Ugandan products still struggle to meet international packaging and branding standards.

Buyers were interested in the products. But many deals came with conditions. Some wanted white labeling, others demanded private labeling, exposing a deeper weakness in how Ugandan goods are prepared for global shelves.

For many industry players, the problem starts long before products leave the factory.

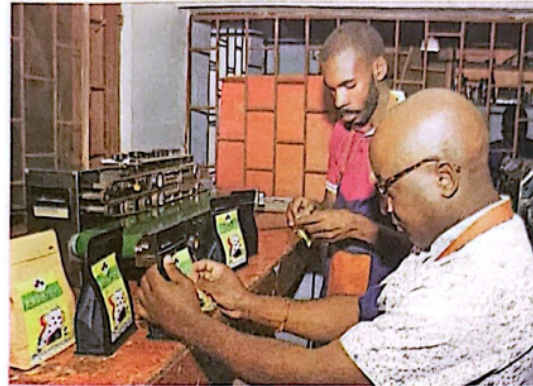
Ezra Muhumuza, executive director of the Uganda Manufacturers Association, says many businesses approach packaging from a personal perspective instead of a market-driven one.

"Most of the time, our innovators come with products, and they say, 'This is my colour, these are my initials for my name. These are my preferred colours.' Wrong beginning. To us in marketing, packaging is the face of a product. What do they want? What is the market saying?" he said.

He explains that many businesses focus on what they personally like instead of what consumers expect, a mistake that weakens products in competitive markets.

Muhumuza says this often creates what he describes as a "packaging paradox," where businesses overload packaging with too many competing messages, branding, product information, functionality and imagery, until the package loses clarity and appeal.

"You find a pack that is almost like a book," he said, explaining how some businesses try to communicate everything at once instead of presenting a simple, clear message to consumers.



Mr Gerald Katabazi (right) with a trainee puts stickers on his Volcano Coffee at the factory in Nakawa Division. Most packaging materials are imported, making them expensive for local businesses. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

Quality 'Many businesses either delay improving packaging or compromise on quality, decisions.'

Beyond selling products, building brands

Rosemary Kezaabu, head of sales and marketing at Luuka Plastics Limited, says the challenge goes beyond export readiness and speaks directly to how Ugandan businesses think about brand building.

"We should not just look at selling a product, but creating a brand so that if I place a product on the shelf today, tomorrow someone comes back for the same product," she said.

According to Kezaabu, packaging should reflect the end user, from usability and storage to consistency in design. Constantly changing packaging, she says, confuses customers and weakens brand identity.

Many businesses fail to consider whether packaging suits the product. Packaging for coffee beans, she explains, is different from that of ground coffee or snacks because each product has different preservation needs and shelf-life requirements.

Packaging: A costly necessity

For exporters, packaging is no longer just about appearance. It has become a business survival issue.

Hilary Bainemigisha, founding director at Forna Health Foods, producers of Aunt Porridge, says packaging must now be treated as a critical part of scaling products into international markets.

His company attracted significant

buyer interest during the Dubai expo, but he admits packaging remains one of the most expensive aspects of growth for exporters.

"Packaging is very important, but it takes a significant portion of costs," he said.

Still, he believes businesses should not wait for perfect packaging before testing the market.

"You don't need perfect packaging to test the market. But once the product is strong, packaging must match its value," he added.

Cost pressure locking out exporters
Beyond branding and design, cost remains one of the biggest barriers facing Ugandan manufacturers. Most packaging materials are imported, making them expensive for local businesses, especially small and medium enterprises trying to scale into export markets.

As a result, many businesses either delay improving packaging or compromise on quality decisions that eventually hurt their competitiveness abroad.

According to World Bank, the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), and Volza trade data, Uganda imports between \$6 million and \$7.5 million worth of plastic packaging annually. Imports rose from \$5.99 million in 2021 to \$7.54 million in 2022, with Kenya supplying more than \$3.4 million worth of packaging materials.

Uganda also recorded 207 shipments of corrugated paper boxes between mid-2024 and mid-2025, against total imports worth about \$13.9 billion in 2024.

Packaging Centre

It is against this backdrop that the Packaging Centre of Excellence has been launched. The initiative aims to reduce Uganda's dependence on imported packaging materials by strengthening local capacity in design, sourcing and production.

Industry players believe the centre could help lower production costs, improve packaging quality and make Ugandan products more competitive in regional and international markets.

Dr. Julia Kigozi, Dean of Food Technology, Nutrition and Bioengineering at

Makerere University, says the centre will act as a one-stop hub for agro-processors and manufacturers seeking technical guidance on packaging.

"The Packaging Centre of Excellence is a very important innovation for our country. It will help agro-processors improve how they do business. Many processors have questions about packaging but lack a central place to get answers," she said.

Makerere University will lead the research component of the centre, focusing on scientific testing to ensure packaging meets required standards.

"We can test whether packaging preserves a product's quality over time, checking sensory properties, moisture content, nutritional value and chemical stability," Kigozi explained.

"Research helps determine how long a product can last in a particular package and whether the packaging materials used are appropriate. It answers the 'why' behind packaging decisions."

On the implementation side, Moses Byaruhanga, Venture Lead under Made in Uganda, says the initiative was designed to solve bottlenecks that continue to limit the competitiveness of local products.

"As Made in Uganda, we positioned ourselves to solve that problem, which is why we are launching the Packaging Centre of Excellence," he said.

"Each vendor or manufacturer should walk into the facility and leave with the right brief, brand and design files, as well as connections to the right packaging material producers."

The centre will operate through four core service areas: packaging research, material advisory, branding and design, and supplier matching.

The initiative will begin with a pilot group of up to 10 selected brands that will receive funding and technical support to build globally competitive products by the end of the year.

Industry stakeholders believe the model could bridge the long-standing gap between research, design and manufacturing, while helping Ugandan businesses package themselves for the markets they have long struggled to access.