

Bridging the Gap: How Stora Enso and Norkol Bring Premium Paperboard to Craft Beverage Brands

The craft beverage industry has a packaging problem. Small breweries and specialty beverage brands want to present their products in high-quality paperboard carriers that convey premium quality. But there's a catch: They can't often meet the minimum order quantities that major mills require.

Stora Enso's North American strategy is built for that gap. The company's growth in the region depends on reaching beyond the traditional mill model and getting premium fiber-based materials to converters and brands of every size, not just the largest accounts. Fortunately, an innovative partnership bridges the gap. Stora Enso, a leading provider of renewable packaging materials, and Norkol Inc, one of the largest independent converters and distributors in the United States, are turning high-volume mill rolls into "small batch" solutions for converters and emerging brands.

The Volume Gap: Creating an "Open Stock" Model

When a craft brewery in Southern California wants distinctive four-pack carriers for a seasonal IPA, they face a familiar logistical hurdle. They might need three pallets of coated kraft back (CKB) board — a volume far too small for a direct mill order. Global mills like Stora Enso's Oulu Mill are optimized for efficiency, typically serving major accounts purchasing full truckloads or even container loads with long lead times.

"That's by design. Stora Enso's mills are built for global scale, producing premium fiber-based packaging materials in volumes that serve the world's largest brand owners and converters," said Jonas Pettersson, President of Stora Enso North America.

“Our production model is optimized to deliver consistent, high-performance materials at the scale our largest customers require. Partnering with a converter and distributor like Norkol extends the reach of those materials to even more customers who want the same quality, just in a different format. This complementary model of our scale plus their flexibility, extends Stora Enso’s portfolio to brands of every size.”

Through this partnership, Norkol effectively creates an “Open Stock” program for premium Stora Enso grades. By warehousing master rolls, Norkol ensures that high-performance materials are available for immediate deployment, eliminating the long lead times and high minimums associated with custom mill runs.

A Partnership Built on Custom Converting and Distribution

Stora Enso is one of the world’s largest providers of fiber-based packaging materials, with a portfolio that includes premium grades like Performa Brilliance and CKB. Built around recyclable and renewable substrates, Stora Enso’s materials are used by major brand owners across food, beverage, personal care, and other consumer goods categories. The company’s North American strategy is focused on broadening access to those materials across the region.

“Reaching the North American market means more than running large mill orders for the biggest brands,” Pettersson said. “We built our strategy around partners who can convert and distribute at the formats and volumes the rest of the market needs. Norkol is central to how we serve this region.”

Norkol Inc, a 58-year-old family-owned company based in Montgomery, Illinois, operates on a model of extreme flexibility. Inside their 330,000-square-foot facility, they utilize special equipment to provide full-service converting

and supply chain solutions, transforming rolls from Stora Enso to meet individual customer specifications.

This means taking a 62-inch roll and slitting it down to 59.25 inches for a specific narrow-web press. It means converting rolls to sheets for printers without sheeting capabilities. Or, it means consolidating multiple board grades into a single LTL (Less Than Truckload) shipment for customers who need variety but can't fill an entire truck with one size.

"We bring in rolls to our distribution center and deliver out to the customer with a merchant mentality," says Martin Kolinski, CEO at Norkol. "We take the operational complexity out of the equation for the smaller converter."

From Stora Enso's perspective, the relationship with Norkol is a strategic extension of how the company brings its materials to the North American market.

"Norkol's converting capabilities and warehousing footprint allow us to bring our portfolio to a much wider set of customers than we could reach on a mill-direct basis," added Pettersson. "That's especially valuable as more brands look to switch from plastic to fiber-based packaging. The partnership lets us collaborate on product development and supply chain solutions in ways that would be more difficult to do alone."

Opening Doors to Innovation

This "open stock" availability has enabled innovative projects that would be impossible through traditional mill-direct channels.

- Four-Pack Carriers
 - This patented system uses paperboard to create beer four-pack carriers that clip directly onto cans. The narrow-web specifications required by the manufacturer's equipment fell

outside Stora Enso's direct-mill format range, so Norkol stepped in to custom-convert the material and manage the project.

- Specialty Barrier Coatings
 - For paper cup applications, Norkol acts as project manager, purchasing material from Stora Enso, converting rolls for specialty coaters who apply barrier coatings, then delivering to cup manufacturers. This complex supply chain coordination would be uneconomical for the mill to manage directly.
- Regional Converter Support
 - Regional converters are building businesses around serving local craft breweries. They need the quality of Stora Enso grades like CKB and CKB Carrier, but in quantities and configurations the mill can't efficiently provide.

A Tiered Market Strategy

Stora Enso and Norkol have created a complementary ecosystem. While mills focus on full truckloads, Norkol serves the “long tail” of customers whose needs fall outside that model.

“Our customers span the full spectrum,” Kolinski explains. “We serve everyone from large commercial printers and packaging converters purchasing hundreds of thousands of tons down to smaller operations buying thousands of tons a year in LTL mixed loads. That flexibility is what sets this model apart.”

The Bigger Picture

The Stora Enso–Norkol partnership also extends well beyond craft beverages. Norkol's full-service converting and distribution capabilities serve converters across food packaging, personal care, and other consumer goods verticals —

any segment where brands need access to premium fiber-based materials without the constraints of mill-direct purchasing. The depth of the Stora Enso relationship distinguishes Norkol from a typical paper seller, enabling collaborative product development, custom specifications, and supply chain solutions tailored to each market.

As the packaging industry shifts from plastic to fiber-based solutions, the supply chain must evolve to keep pace. Regulatory tailwinds are accelerating this transition: extended producer responsibility (EPR) legislation is expanding across North America, placing financial responsibility for packaging waste on brand owners and creating direct incentives to move away from plastic. At the same time, consumer demand for sustainable packaging continues to grow, with the 2025 Two Sides North America Trend Tracker finding that 49% of U.S. consumers say paper and cardboard packaging is best for the environment overall.

Stora Enso's strategy is built around this transition, producing renewable, fiber-based packaging materials designed to substitute for plastic alternatives, with innovations like the Oulu Mill's new production line and materials delivering efficiency improvements that can help reduce carbon footprint. But that strategy only reaches its full potential when the supply chain can deliver these materials to brands of every size, not just the largest accounts. That's the role Norkol fills.

Small brands shouldn't be locked out of premium packaging due to volume constraints. Through this "small batch" approach, Stora Enso and Norkol ensure that even a local micro-brewery or emerging consumer brand can access world-class materials, at their specifications, proving that premium quality doesn't have to be exclusive to premium volume.