



GOING GREEN:

Trends in Sustainable Product Packaging

Consumers today are more interested than ever in matching their personal values with the products they buy. With growing concern about climate change, environmental issues and the problem of waste, these values have become top-of-mind for many consumers.

As such, people are looking to companies to lead the way in environmental stewardship with products that are sourced, produced and packaged in a sustainable way.

As the importance of sustainable packaging gains support, the concept is expanding beyond its original focus on a product's end of life to encompass the full product lifecycle. This is leading to a variety of innovations and cutting-edge trends in product packaging that are not only cost-effective, efficient and sustainable, but also good business.

Sustainability in general is certainly now well beyond a fad. According to the Natural Marketing Institute's 2018 LOHAS Sustainability in America Consumer Insights & Trends Report, more than half of consumers (56%) now realize that sustainability is not something that can be put on hold. What's more, they now say they expect other entities, like the government and corporations, to step up their efforts and ensure continuing progress in sustainable initiatives.

The NMI Sustainability Report also showed that growing numbers of consumers now believe that the decisions they make on a daily basis can impact sustainability. While this attitude is common for about one in three Baby Boomers,

the growth in this belief is primarily among younger consumers and highest among Millennials, with 54% saying they agree with this idea.

These seismic attitudinal shifts are prompting disruption in a variety of industries, but packaging has been at the forefront of these changes. So it's not surprising that sustainable packaging of some sort – from recyclable and environmentally friendly packaging to minimal packaging – now resonates as an important product attribute for about one in three consumers.¹

While the idea of recycled packaging has been around since the 1970s, prompted by early efforts to reduce waste, boost recycling and develop better packaging materials, the concept today has broadened to include all aspects of a product's lifecycle.

The trend is also evolving due to a growing consumer awareness of waste issues, which is bolstering a clear governmental mandate to reduce waste. State and city governments, for example, are taking matters into their own hands by banning use of plastic (especially plastic grocery bags), requiring recycling programs and the use of reusable materials.

A growing connection between daily choices and environmental health

**Percent of general population who agree with the statement:
"They make their decisions with an understanding of the effect they will have on the health and sustainability of the world, its environment and people."**

2006: **32%**



2016: **42%**



Source: NMI's 2018 LOHAS Sustainability in America Consumer Insights & Trends Report

More than 70 bills have been introduced in state legislatures around the country during the 2017-2018 legislative session, the majority of which proposed bans or fees on use of plastic grocery bags and improved recycling programs.²

Although the general concept of sustainable packaging is not that difficult to comprehend, for companies considering these changes it now involves far more than just swapping one package for another.

The Sustainable Packaging Coalition created a definition of sustainable packaging that speaks to its many considerations:

- Is beneficial, safe and healthy for individuals and communities throughout its lifecycle
- Meets market criteria for performance and cost
- Is sourced, manufactured, transported and recycled using renewable energy
- Optimizes the use of renewable or recycled source materials
- Is manufactured using clean production technologies and best practices
- Is made from materials healthy through the life cycle
- Is physically designed to optimize materials and energy
- Is effectively recovered and utilized in biological and/or industrial closed-loop cycles.³

Materials and beyond

The development of these parameters has helped spur the creation of new sustainable alternatives to packaging containing plastic, Styrofoam and other environmentally unfriendly materials. Companies have developed innovative packaging materials such as plant-based bioplastics, first pioneered by Coca Cola with its first-generation PlantBottle®, which replaced the polyethylene terephthalate (PET) with renewable materials made from sugar cane. Since then, many other options have come on the scene, including packaging made with bamboo, beech tree pulp, beeswax, wheat straw and mushrooms.

Companies are now also looking beyond specific materials toward various ways to be more sustainable, from sourcing and manufacturing of packaging to its labeling. Here are a few of the trends to watch:

Streamlined packaging: Companies are downsizing, slimming and creating lighter weight packages which can benefit both the manufacturer and the consumer. Smaller or lighter weight physical packaging creates less waste, often costs less, and is a clear indicator to consumers of a company's efforts to minimize waste.

Reducing waste: This seems like a no-brainer, but this idea still has plenty of legs – and companies are pushing the envelope in creating best practices for minimizing unnecessary waste. Beyond changing packaging material or eliminating packaging altogether, companies can also consider logistical efficiencies. For example, a company could consider a different package shape, or an alternate system that might be more efficient in helping to minimize the amount of material used or the package waste incurred. One key area that is not often considered is adding “print inspection” to quality control practices. This can help catch quality problems and prevent product recalls that create huge amounts of unnecessary package waste.⁴

Recycling 2.0: Again this appears fairly obvious, but there are still many things companies can do to improve their use of recyclable and renewable materials in their packaging. Some of the innovations include ecological paper bottles made with recycled corrugated cardboard and newspapers, which have become popular for products like wine, protein powders, pet food and personal care products; as well as insulated packaging made from jute and recycled burlap bags that is being used in the meal kit category and can be composted after use.⁵

In addition, USDA researchers have developed edible, biodegradable packaging film made from the milk protein casein as an alternative to plastic wrap. This is used to wrap around foods such as meat, bread and cheese to prevent spoilage. Another notable example is EnviroLife™, a sustainable recycled fiber material that is the only 100% post-consumer recycled fiber that is compliant with FDA standards for direct food contact. It is typically used for cups and boxes, and helps to reduce utilization of resources and impacts to forestry, as well as waste in landfills.⁶

Clearer labels: Labels have often been overlooked in the quest for sustainable packaging. However, clear and concise labels can help inform customers of critical usage directions, disposal methods and proper recycling. This not only ensures that packaging is properly disposed of, but also helps educate consumers about recycling and increases transparency about a company's sustainability efforts.⁷

Ultimately, consumers around the world are looking for companies to take the lead in these environmental measures. Innovations in packaging, waste reduction and use of recyclable fibers are proving to be a winning combination for companies and the environment. And as eco-friendly values continue to gain ground, companies that don't get on the bandwagon may find themselves left in the dust.

SOURCES

¹ Natural Marketing Institute's 2018 LOHAS Sustainability in America Consumer Insights & Trends Report.

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³ Sustainable Packaging Coalition. Definition of Sustainable Packaging.
<https://sustainablepackaging.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/Definition-of-Sustainable-Packaging.pdf>

⁴ SustainableBusinessToolKit.com. "Sustainable Packaging Trends – How Brands and Companies Must Adapt." February 26, 2018.
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⁵ Sustainable Brands.com. "Three Sustainability Trends Reshaping the Food Packaging Industry."
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⁶ Ibid. Sustainable Brands.

⁷ Ibid. Sustainable BusinessToolKit.