

Biodegradable packaging

Organic likely to lead the way

» **Alison Leader** reports on developments in the contentious area of biodegradable packaging and how you can reduce your business's packaging footprint.

Climate change, greenhouse gases, water shortages and energy usage are all issues provoking questions about the sustainability of our lifestyle. Being environmentally responsible is more important to consumers than ever, and scope for change on the part of government and industry is widening as we become aware of the need for a back-to-nature approach.

A key issue is that of packaging biodegradability, which, if accepted by consumers and the wider retail industry, would have a major impact on the amount of waste sent to landfill.

Perceptions persist about overpackaging and excessive waste and, unless something changes with packaging production, criticisms are likely to become louder. The Packaging Council of Australia (PCA) argues that packaging delivers significant environmental benefits, and points out its record base of environmental achievement, with its unpublicised lead on recycling and regulatory and commercial pressures that are reducing the amount of resources, energy and water being put into producing packaging. There is also an argument that packaging reduces product waste by protecting products from damage, optimising processing and enabling more efficient transport, thereby increasing the shelf life of perishable products.

In Australia, the National Packaging Covenant has, since 1999, been the principal national policy instrument for improving the environmental sustainability of packaging. This has led to a 56 per cent recycling rate in Australia, according to 2005 figures. Commitment to kerbside and away-from-home recycling programs is seen by the PCA as still vitally important, and implementation of biodegradable strategies needs to be supportive of this.

PCA CEO, Gavin Williams, is in favour of biodegradable packaging but says it needs to be promoted with caution. 'There's no doubt biodegradable or compostable packaging is becoming a big issue,' he says. 'Those sorts of packaging materials are perceived as having an environmental advantage and it's also an exciting opportunity for farmers. It enables supermarkets to dispose of unsoiled fresh produce without having to unpack it. There's public enthusiasm for such products, but also the potential for confusion between biodegradable plastics and recyclable plastics.' Williams believes the challenge of educating consumers will be formidable. 'While there's a closed loop there's no problem, but there are a lot of issues raised regarding life cycle. The issue of packaging recycling is prominent because consumers feel a direct responsibility and that they can make a personal difference.'

Williams is sure biodegradability will become a

hotter topic, with the PCA involved in hosting seminars on it this year. 'It's a complex issue,' he comments. 'There are potential problems with how materials interface with recycling, and there's the assumption on the part of consumers that because it's biodegradable it will break down, and it doesn't matter how it's disposed of. It's important not to undermine [the achievements of recycling]. Currently we are recycling used packaging at a rate of 56 per cent. A lot of this is through kerbside, and 90 to 95 per cent of households are involved. Used packaging is now a tradable commodity – it's now being sent to places like China. To really push it forward there would need to be a major educational drive.' He says it's not necessarily a financial issue, as some claim. 'Some of the major food companies are multinational companies, for example Unilever, Kraft, Procter & Gamble. It is likely the product will become an international one.' As acceptance goes up worldwide, the costs in production would likely come down.

Williams says it's important to keep in mind trends in the USA and UK, where retailers are becoming more active on the packaging front. He believes the stance is partly driven by environmental concerns, but cautions that the stance is not altogether altruistic. 'They see it as a mechanism to reevaluate packaging, minimise packaging and improve the commercial viability by reducing their costs,' he claims. 'The whole sustainable issue has a focus that was absent six months ago... It's not a passing phenomenon – it's impacting consumers. Ethics do come into play, but there's a risk of simplistic responses.'

One of these responses might be, 'biodegradable packaging is better'. 'It's not quite that simple,' says Williams. 'The impact on the traditional recycling stream has to be considered. Certainly cost is an issue, but as larger companies get involved cost issues are less influential. Also, consumers say – and this is misleading – that they're prepared to pay a premium for environmentally superior packaging. In the past, the evidence has been that despite these statements the reality is quite different. 'We'd argue that excessive packaging is few and far between. It actually costs more to have less packaging. Packaging doesn't add to waste, but reduces it by keeping food fresher for longer, and if we didn't have it we'd have to dispose of lots of food. The industry needs to explain that ... and also be more active in explaining the issues involved. The modern era wants easy-to-open, tamper-evident, child-resistant packaging. Consumers also want convenience – reheatable containers and so on. Certainly environmental issues are a major factor but they're not the only factor. The variety of issues is as wide as there are types of consumers.'



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