

What defines green in packaging?

Retailers driving most demand in sustainable packaging & carry bags

» A strongly debated topic in the food and retail industries is, what are the most sustainable options for retail product packaging, and for carry bags and packing bags.

Warren Beaumont reports.

While there is a trend to 'green' and sustainable packaging by some food and consumer goods companies, it is food retailers and wholesalers who are introducing most of the changes - with fresh produce the main beneficiary.

With the bandwagon for claiming green credentials increasingly popular, legal liability is an issue, with rising backlash against 'greenwashing' and incorrect claims.

A recent point in case (as reported by consumer organisation Choice) is the Boomerang Alliance, a coalition of local government and environmental groups. The group complained to the National Packaging Covenant Council that a member company's coffee brand packaging did not abide by covenant rules, as the casing was excessively bulky and not truly recyclable.

Canadian organic cereal manufacturer Nature's Path has spoken out against 'greenwashing' in the industry. Nature's Path uses packaging boxes made from recycled cardboard and is reducing its box sizes by 10 per cent without reducing food weight.

Another leader in the field is local retailer Macro Wholefoods Market who use recycled, biodegradable paper bags for packing products in all stores, recycled paper in promotional materials, and also environmentally friendly packaging for its house brand products.

Michael Lawrence of Total Package, a certified organic business which does contract packing for major dry grocery and food companies, said many companies would like to move from plastics to recyclable or biodegradable packaging, and that cost is not the major barrier.

"Insurance indemnity on food products is the barrier as the company is personally liable for food safety such as moisture in the product, tampering, rancidity and if a consumer gets ill," he said. "In a court of law it could be said the company knew the inherent risk and the insurance is therefore void."

Mr Lawrence said organics is a tiny industry in Australia compared to what is turned over in supermarkets and economies of scale here are small for packaging. "I believe there is an increase in sustainable and biodegradable packaging of fresh produce through

wholesalers and retailers," he said.

Biodegradable films win contracts

Australian Packaging has recently won contracts to supply a new biodegradable wrapping film for products such as fresh fruit and vegetables, dried foods, muesli, cakes, confectionery, bakery products, and magazines.

Dianne Anderson of Australian Packaging said demand for biodegradable film is growing due to the price coming down through more industry use, with most demand being driven by pressure for more sustainable packaging in food such as biodegradable packaging and packaging that does not contain harmful chemicals.

"Our product is seen as a safe,



biodegradable product, while most other products are made from PE, PP, and polyester/PET that are price driven," she said.

Ms Anderson said none of the biodegradable films have a shrink-wrap option for in-store use, while the supermarket majors have been orchestrating a move toward 'bio-films' during the past few years.

"The biopolymer films supplied by Australian Packaging are produced from renewable wood pulp sourced from managed plantations," she said. "These films are certified biodegradable and organically recyclable (compostable). They are not suited for thermal recycling. Many biopolymer films are sourced from renewable raw materials such as wheat, potatoes or corn.

"Australian Packaging's bio-films are cellulose based, which is the most abundant of all naturally occurring organic materials. They are supplied as clear, white or metalised and in plain or printed, in either roll or bag form."

Stock of the films is not widely available in relatively small quantities. The company expects this will change as usage increases and when the price is likely to be driven down.

Bio Bag's renewable packaging

Bio Bag Australasia supplies sustainable biodegradable packaging for a wide variety of uses. The company's Neil Thomson said the question of what level of breathability of films is suitable for packaging is a big topic as the optimum level of breathability varies according to the precise product.

"What we can say is that packing fresh vegetables in breathable biofilms is much better than using PE as the breathability avoids sweating (and condensation on the inside of the packaging) and permits ethylene, the ripening agent to escape. This extends shelf life.

"Much packaging in supermarkets is modified atmosphere packaging (MOP). This requires non-breathable material for which our biofilms are not suitable. For health and beauty products suitability does depend on the particular product and expected storage life."

Bio Bag's website said: "All our grades of film are based on renewable resources and certified to be compostable according to the European Standard EN13432 and US Standard ASTM D6400."

Mr Thomson said Bio Bag's films are based on renewable materials of vegetable origin that come in various grades to meet different purposes. "Our grades now usually contain little starch but mainly non-food, non irrigated vegetable oils grown on marginal land. We use no GMO products," he said.

"Another benefit is there are no harmful chemicals. European Standard, EN13432, which will probably become the ISO standard for compostable biodegradable materials, sets tight limits on the amount of chemicals permitted. Concern over chemicals in some drinks bottles is justified. These standards assure consumers that no such chemicals are present in packaging.

"A risk with all materials is the toxins contained in printing inks. Our green ink

(on our standard bags) is certified biodegradable. Care should be taken in using inks to ensure they are suitable and are not in contact in food."

Mr Thomson said prices have remained stable, while conventional plastics will continue to become more expensive, as oil (a main component in plastic) is still underpriced. "Demand for alternatives to plastic is growing through awareness of the implications of global warming and the earth's limited resources," he said.

"Ultimately growth is driven by the customer who must demand the product and actually buy more sustainable products at a price premium over non-sustainable packaging," he said.

The green bag

When it comes to packaging and carry-bags, there is often some degree of confusion as to what is truly green.

Woolworths and Coles introduced the so-called 'green' or 'enviro' bags for sale as carry bags in their supermarkets. Woolworths implemented 30% recycled content in supermarket bags. Coles are using large plastic checkout bags with

recycled content, made from clean 'post industrial waste'.

Going the extra step, South Australia has banned plastic bags at retail from April 2009.

In a report released by Environment Australia: 'Plastic Shopping Bags – Analysis of Levies and Environmental Impacts, 40 key findings were made. One important finding was that:

"The environmental assessment showed less significant and consistent gains are made by switching from HDPE (high density polyethylene) to other single use bags, such as paper and biodegradable bags, with potential gains in litter being offset by negative resource use outcomes."

The woven HDPE bag was the preferred option in many areas and had the lowest Greenhouse (CO₂ equiv) rating of 0.628; based on 52 shopping trips per year, with 10 average plastic shopping bag loads each trip. On the other hand biodegradable starch-based bags had a 6.61 Greenhouse rating.

Dr Ralph Horne of RMIT University's Urban Liveability research team said while there a number of problems with the different shopping bags in use, the reusable heavy duty (HDPE) shopping bags usually provide a significant environmental benefit

if used 100 times.

Dr Horne said bags made from cotton for instance could have environmental impacts upstream or downstream, and we should question the environmental impacts of planting crops, such as land and water use, and fertiliser use.

"You could use less fossil fuel per bag but some bags could become contaminants in plastic recycling." He said.

Litter potential is an important consideration in choice of bags, and Dr Horne said there is a powerful argument for phasing out the free, supermarket/food store type of plastic bags used to pack groceries and fresh foods.

"Biodegradable packaging is not the only answer as it is not fossil fuel-free," Dr Horne said. "It would take fossil fuel inputs and energy to grow the vegetables to make biodegradable bags, similarly with paper bags that are useful for special purposes such as packing light produce etc.

"Jute, calico, cotton, plastic, all could all have a place if used every day and are reusable. It is the best environmental option if used consistently - we need to get shopper's behaviour and the bag option right."



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