ARE WE SUFFOCATING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE PACKAGING PROBLEM?

It has to be said, packaging gets a lot of bad press. Whether it’s plastic bags at supermarkets or over-packaged items using an array of plastic and cardboard, most people have a pet hate linked to packaging. Landfill is full of it, recycling rates aren’t climbing quickly enough – and nobody wants rubbish in hedgerows or on beaches. It feels like we are suffocating under a mountain of packaging waste.

But is it really that simple – is packaging really the scourge of our society? Would we be better off without it? Should other consumer issues be getting more attention? The paradoxes within the packaging debate make it difficult for businesses to explain where efforts should be focused. We’ve asked Dick Searle, Chief Executive of The Packaging Federation and Alasdair James, Director of Waste, Recycling & Packaging at Tesco plc to drill a bit deeper into the packaging paradox – waste creator or waste saver?

So is packaging as big an issue as consumers, the media and politicians seem to think? Particularly at a time when food prices and security of supply are a major issue?

Overall, our packaging ‘consumption’ in the UK puts us at number seven in the EU league table and our growth per head is one of the lowest – indeed in the last seven years, packaging growth at 3% is less than one fifth of GDP and consumer spending growth over the same period.

So what are its real environmental impacts? Packaging is highly visible, particularly once it is used. It receives an enormous amount of media and political focus – at a level wholly disproportionate to its true impact. Less than 20% of household waste is packaging and the amount of packaging going to landfill is less than 3% of total landfill. Its carbon footprint is less than 2% of the UK’s footprint and the carbon impact of the wastage that it prevents would be much higher than this figure. The growing use of plastics for load wrapping has also enabled transportation economies as lighter loads are moved.

The whole issue of the material used is highly complex with the first consideration always that the packaging works. Environmental impact covers a range of issues including carbon footprint,
recyclability, ‘sustainability’, ‘replenishability’ and weight. Not one of these should be the sole determinant of the material used. It is the overall impact on the environment that has to be assessed – providing the packaging function is correct.

The problem is that most consumers look at used packaging with little thought for the role that it’s played in getting goods safely from producer to point of usage. Contrary to popular belief, the whole packaging supply chain has been working for decades to minimise the impact of packaging. Most recently, the focus has been on primary packaging, but a substantial amount of packaging is used for actually getting the goods into retailer outlets and is never seen by consumers. And most of the negative media coverage is more to do with experience or retail methodology including theft minimisation. The problem is that most consumers look at used packaging with little thought for the role that it’s played in getting goods safely from producer to point of usage and the role it continues to play in preserving products until they are used. Arguably, the biggest area of criticism is fruit, vegetable and meat packaging in supermarkets. Arguably, the biggest area of criticism is fruit, vegetable and meat packaging in supermarkets.

As long as consumers want to buy the widest range of goods all day and every day, there will be a need for primary packaging. And the extent to which we use primary packaging is more to do with the quality of recyclate available and the lack of facilities for recycling materials appropriate for recycling. This is by no means a simple case of considering the material used. As always, it is important to consider the whole life of the product including packaging and how we pack a product. In order to understand carbon footprints and know that, when thinking about how you pack a product, it pays to look at the big picture, not just the product in isolation. We’ve done a great deal of work recently to understand carbon footprints and know that, while packaging typically makes up a small part of the overall footprint, there are opportunities here to make a real difference. We now receive New World wine in barrels and bottle it ourselves in this country to save thousands of tonnes of glass from being shipped half way round the planet. This new approach is cheaper, more efficient and much better for the environment.

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Whether packaging is a ‘Saint’ or ‘Sinner’ will be, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder.

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By 2010, we aim to have reduced the packaging on all the products we sell by 25%. It is a stretching target but, by stating our ambitions clearly, we know that everyone in our business – and in all those businesses that supply us – can appreciate what we are trying to achieve. We’ve worked with all the suppliers of our products and used shrink wrap instead. We saved 72 tonnes of mixed packaging as a result.

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1. Does it do its job?

We spend £60m every year on packaging so it is in our interest to find ways to reduce what we use. This can be a simple case of using lighter weight or less choice, or a much more complex approach that has been integrated into the way in which the product is designed. Last year, we dropped bulky blister packs from our electrical products and used shrink wrap instead. We saved 72 tonnes of mixed packaging as a result.

2. Can we use less of it?

We are trying to increase the amount of recycled content in the materials we buy. For instance, we now sell our freshly baked buns and cakes in clear plastic boxes made from 50% recycled PET. We are trying to increase the amount of recycled content in the materials we buy. For instance, we now sell our freshly baked buns and cakes in clear plastic boxes made from 50% recycled PET.

3. Is there a better material?

Once we’ve thought about the perfect design, we can think about the best material to make it from. We are trying to increase the amount of recycled content in the materials we buy. For instance, we now sell our freshly baked buns and cakes in clear plastic boxes made from 50% recycled PET.