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The Pandemic Is Bringing Plastic Back To Food Packaging



Louis Biscotti Contributor

[Food & Drink](#)

National Leader, Food & Beverage Services Group, Marcum

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed just about everything, and food and beverage packaging is one of the most visible.

As public health concerns dictated a new approach to consumer safety from restaurants to the supermarket aisle, plastic was seemingly everywhere, with single-use reversing a trend to, once again, proliferate. Sales of packaged food and takeout skyrocketed, taking plastic containers with them. Consumers flocked to favored brands and comfort foods whose familiar packaging offered a form of reassurance to the public. And the very idea of packaging took on new meaning.

On the most basic level, pre-coronavirus, there was a big push to reduce single-use plastic bags and packaging. Some cities succeeded in banning them altogether, while others were moving in this direction. Reusable was in. Disposable was out. [Walmart](#) vowed to decrease plastic packaging and increase recycling.

The pandemic hasn't changed the idea that less is more for the environment, but it has changed priorities. Starbucks' initiative encouraging people to bring and refill their own cups suddenly seemed like a way of spreading a virus as well as saving the planet. Of necessity, we've circled back from sustainable to single-use to help reduce infection risk.

"Demand for packaged food witnessed a surge as lockdowns were imposed, and packaged food and health supplements with extended shelf life started going off the racks," according to [Zacks](#).

The plastics industry hasn't been immune to the pandemic, due to lower car sales. Still, more than one third of plastic produced is used in packaging, according to Walmart. Sustainability is back in the back seat, at least for now. [McKinsey & Co.](#) predicted packaging for groceries, healthcare products and e-commerce would "rise sharply," calling food packaging "the packaging industry's largest area of activity."

Plastic masks and gloves were a big driver in personal protective equipment, or PPE. And in food and beverage, the [Plastics Industry Association](#) touted plastic as protecting and providing convenience. [Greenpeace](#) pushed back, saying "reusable systems can be used safely by employing basic hygiene."

As packaging proliferated, packaging design was directly impacted during the pandemic as online shopping soared. That meant more people would be browsing virtual versions of packaging online, rather than on store shelves. Big food & beverage relied on images to help sell online as brands rolled out and expanded their own e-commerce.

"There is a need for packaging to be much more attuned to the digital age," [Innova Market Insights](#) wrote amid an e-commerce explosion. "Shape and color will need to be more attuned and graphic elements must stand out in order to attract consumer attention."

Packaging design had to work harder to get consumer attention on a crowded screen—more so than on a shelf. Images had to motivate customers to put products in a virtual, rather than a tangible, shopping cart.

QSRmagazine.com even touted [Innovative Pandemic Packaging](#) or “IPP” as a way “to better connect with” customers in a contactless world. It is “empathetic, comforting, convenient, and helpful,” according to the site.

Packaging builds loyalty and brand awareness online, at drive-throughs and at the delivery door, as personal contact at the store level is reduced or eliminated. More packaging added expense, even as oil prices fell, reducing the cost of plastic. So strategies emerged to reduce packaging. Some take-outs began asking customers to “opt in” if they wanted plasticware.

Still, sustainable packaging is continuing to sustain its own push amid the pandemic. Plant-based or cellulose-based packaging provides biodegradable or compostable options. [Dole](#) is looking at ways to make eco-friendly packaging out of pineapple skins and banana leaves. British packaging company Frugalpac debuted the [Frugal Bottle](#) made with 94% paperboard and a liner to hold the wine.

And [Loop](#) is expanding the “milkman model” of packaging in the United States, delivering items in reusable containers that are picked up, cleaned and refilled. They handle products from Nestle, Procter & Gamble and PepsiCo, as well as Teva Deli plant-based burgers and Nature’s Path Organic foods.

What will happen when the dust—or the virus—settles? Will the pandemic fears that drove an increase in package redesign and plastic consumption mean more packaging is here to stay? Or will we return to less-is-more, with recycling and reuse pushing single-use back to the back of the shelf?

On a movie set, “it’s a wrap” means “the end.” When it comes to packaging, though, those words could mean lasting changes for breakfast, lunch and dinner.