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Recycling And Reuse? Ways To Win The War On Waste

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No one can question that we have a global problem with food and beverage waste. The numbers show the scale of how much food and money is wasted annually. According to The World Counts website, roughly one third, or about 1.3 billion tons, of the world's food is wasted. But more than that ends up in landfills.

The F&B industry, along with many others, generates a huge amount of waste through packaging. The World Bank projects that global municipal waste will increase to 3.4 billion metric tons and there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. How can the world and the F&B industry confront the fact that packaging waste is generating both cost and pollution?

Recycling is a start

Recycling is a start, and big companies are making a big push, but recycling cannot do the job alone. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, consumers globally use about 1 trillion plastic bags annually, with fewer than 10% in the U.S. ultimately recycled. That leaves a lot of room for

more recycling, but recycling is unlikely to be the whole answer to the problem.

The food and beverage industry is looking at how to make sustainable packaging a larger part of the answer — not only recycling and reusing plastic, but replacing plastic with new materials.

Confronting packaging waste

Big F&B companies are taking steps to advance solutions, even as current product packaging continues to accumulate in waste streams. In 18 markets Coca-ColaKO **+0.4%** offers beverages packaged in 100 percent recycled PET bottles, some stating, “Recycle me again. I am made of 100% recycled plastic.” Nestlé said it doubled the amount of recycled polyethylene terephthalate in its water business since 2019, to 16.5 percent. And WalmartWMT **+1.1%** says it is “optimizing packaging” and “reducing single-use plastic bag waste,” among other claims.

Evian manufactures some “bottles made from bottles” or recycled plastics. Hormel FoodsHRL **-0.2%** introduced packaging for 16-ounce Planters Dry Roasted Peanuts using 8% less plastic. The company said this will save 220 tons of plastic per year, according to Food Dive. Hormel reduced packaging by 727,000 pounds in 2021, which saves money as well as reducing waste. Nestlé introduced Nespresso capsules made with 80 percent recycled aluminum.

Packaging partnerships

Times, and with them, packaging, are changing, as big companies collaborate with innovators in the CPG industry. This is resulting in income opportunities for innovators. Coca-Cola is teaming with Danish startup Paboco to develop a paper bottle that, one day, could provide new packaging on the shelf. Kraft

Heinz teamed with Pulpex on ketchup bottles made of wood pulp. And Molson Coors rolled out cardboard carriers to replace those pesky plastic 6-pack rings.

Chobani rolled out paper-based yogurt cups healthier for the environment. Meanwhile, Veuve Clicquot partnered with packaging company Canopy to make champagne boxes constituted of 50% recycled paper and 50% hemp. The boxes are reportedly 12% lighter than traditional boxes, saving on shipping. And Mars teamed with packaging company Berry to provide jars made with 15% recycled plastic for M&M's, Starburst, and Skittles bulk products.

None of this may (yet) be “perfect” packaging, but companies can build goodwill and elevate their brands while testing new, healthier approaches to packaging solutions.

Reuse could be a better solution

The fourth “R” — reuse — may be one way to make a better, cleaner world. Matt Prindiville, CEO of Upstream, outlined big opportunities for F&B companies, asserting that firms that reduce waste can boost earnings. And green efforts can boost branding along the way. He stated that there is no way we can hit our climate goals without reuse. It may sound like a utopian concept, especially with safety on the minds of consumers after the Covid pandemic. But where there's a will, there often is a way.

Long before consumer recycling became mainstream, we all dumped our garbage into one bin. Today it is the norm to have different bins for different types of waste.

Bin there, done that

Reuse can be successful if our current bin system is expanded to accommodate different products. On Upstream's website, for instance, there are links to companies that have dedicated reusable products for F&B companies, and the variations are quite interesting. For food services, there are reusable cups. For takeout and delivery, it gets more complicated, but there are reuse services available for restaurants.

Prinidville talked about EPR (extended policy responsibilities) for F&B companies. Developing a universal service, rather than trying to do it alone, would eventually lower costs. Extraction subsidies and recycling subsidies will also help in lowering costs. But reuse can play a big role in any battle against waste.

Reuse re-considered

Reuse can bring a wide range of benefits, according to Upstream. For instance, reuse reduces costs for the food service industry, with minimal dishwashing and additional labor. It increases customer and operator satisfaction, builds brand loyalty, provides customer data, and creates opportunities for entrepreneurs and investors to innovate.

The Clean Water Fund's ReThink Disposable program in California showed companies saved money by switching to reusables for on-site dining, according to Upstream. Typical savings for a small business range from \$3,000 to \$22,000, while eliminating 110,000 to 225,000 packaging items and 1,300-2,200 lbs. per business. What's good for a company's economics can be good for the environment.

Legislation is accelerating

Reuse and regulation? Governments are seeking to reduce or eliminate plastic bags in what amounts to a global shift. In New York, for instance, the Bag Waste Reduction Law or a plastic bag ban went into effect March 1, 2020. Other states, such as California, Connecticut, Maine, Oregon and Washington all have bans on disposable or plastic bags. Even if the ban is not always enforced in all subject locations, plastic bags are not as ubiquitous as they once were.

Similar steps are being taken around the nation and the world. Plastic bag bans and charges for single-use bags are in place in at least 127 countries globally. Ten percent of all beverages at city-sponsored events in San Francisco are required to be served in reusable cups. Nearly half a dozen California cities require reusable foodware for in-restaurant dining.

Changing behavior

Sometimes the new ingredient in a product is new use instructions. Shake 'N Bake, for instance, has long urged customers to shake breadcrumbs in plastic bags. Brand owner Kraft Heinz, however, got the plastic out, by removing the bags from Shake 'N Bake products. The company instead encourages consumers to shake with reusable (typically plastic) containers. It even puts in a good word for going green, saying Shake 'N Bake is “just as effective and delicious without the plastic waste.” Creating inconvenience can lead to backlash, but going green can generate goodwill and help generate good sales.

Looking forward

Many companies issue corporate responsibility reports. They often emphasize the ways companies are seeking to innovate, including looking at new means

of packaging. But big change will require big, bold decisions. Reuse can be a big part of that along with recycling. Companies need to keep testing new packaging, reusable solutions and recycling.

In the end, reducing waste can reduce cost and maybe even boost earnings. Companies can go green, and also boost the green they make. Hopefully, progress towards reducing waste streams won't be slowed up by wasting more time. The F&B industry can and should accelerate on the path that's healthier both for earnings and for the environment.