

Face masks, PPE and throwaway cutlery – after Covid, where's next for sustainable packaging?

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FULL TEXT

In the last five to 10 years, the packaging industry has gone through something of a rebirth. Where previously sustainability was a bit of an add-on, many companies today are busily working behind the scenes to make their packaging more eco-friendly. And while there is much work to be done –the recycling rate of plastic packaging in Europe stood at just 40% last year –a 2020 report by McKinsey attested that sustainability is indeed driving significant change in consumer packaging. “Regulators are moving on the issue, and fast-moving consumer goods companies and retailers are proactively making bold commitments to improve both the sustainability of their packaging and to fundamentally rethink their packaging systems,” the report stated.

Then along came the pandemic. Suddenly –and for good reason –hygiene trumped all other concerns.

Sustainability came second to safety, and the use of single-use plastics began to go up. For example, a survey in France in July 2020, cited by the European Environment Agency, found that 5% of people had been throwing disposable face masks on to public roads, and the UK’s Foodservice Packaging Association reported last April that single-use cups and cutlery –some of the kinds most often found on beaches and countryside –were “in huge demand”.

“[The pandemic has been] a bit of a watershed moment for the packaging industry,” says Brandi Schuster, head of market and customer activation for Packaging Adhesives at global chemical and consumer goods company, Henkel. “Because there are two ways we could go. You could say, well, we have a few more years now, because people are into single-use again, and that’s good for us. Or we could use this momentum to continue to drive sustainability.” Schuster hopes a recognition by the public of the value that packaging brings –its ability to keep food and medicines fresh and safe –might drive a shift in perception: that packaging is a necessary part of modern life and that efforts to make it more sustainable should swiftly continue.

“It is absolutely clear that the future will be a new balance between responsible reuse and sensible single use. However, this pandemic showed us that we will need a certain percentage of single-use-packaging,” says Roberta Colotta, main coordinator of 360° Foodservice, a trade association representing businesses in the food service packaging industry. On the whole, however, the direction of travel is towards packaging that is reusable, recyclable or compostable, she says. So much so that 360° Foodservice has repositioned itself as a representative of those pioneering in this area –manufacturers, distributors, users and so on –as well as those who are committed to working to reach these goals. “We know that the world is changing; reuse will be part of the future,” says Colotta. “Our members realise and completely understand that.”

Among their members is Henkel, which manufactures adhesives and coatings necessary to produce packaging. These adhesives can be found in pharmaceutical blister packages, in labels used on PET bottles and in paper straws, while a coating might line a paper coffee cup to keep the contents warm while protecting the drinker’s hands.

A joined-up response

Although sustainability is increasingly factored into packaging design, and legislation is pushing sector change, the value chain isn’t always joined up. In July this year, as part of the single-use products (SUP) directive, an EU-wide ban on 10 types of single-use products, including certain packaging made of or containing plastics, came into

force. Banned items include some single-use plastic bags, plates, expanded polystyrene food and beverage containers, stirrers, cutlery and straws, among others. To consumers it might sound like a simple change, but as with everything in packaging, in practice, it's complicated and the industry is facing unintended consequences. Take straws, for example. As more and more paper straws come on the market, 360° Foodservice found that some products entering the EU market were not meeting EU health and safety standards. "Unsafe alternatives are coming in mostly from outside Europe," says Colotta .

In response, the trade body has developed the Quality Straws initiative, of which Henkel is a signatory. Companies in the paper straw supply chain who sign on commit to being fully compliant with all EU health and safety regulations. 360° Foodservice has introduced a label that signatories can place on their products to indicate this compliance. Market surveillance will follow.

Getting ahead of the legislation

Elodie Picard is global head of market strategy for Tapes and Labels at Henkel Packaging Adhesives, and one of the "go-to" people in her department for packaging sustainability. She says that Henkel is more than prepared for the SUP directive: "This is something that we have been working on for many months and [even] years." Indeed, Schuster adds that the company as a whole makes changes in anticipation of trends and societal shifts rather than in response to legislation, whether that's working with partners to redesign packaging from the outset or –in the case of paper straws that require an adhesive to stick the spiralised paper together –creating safe adhesives that are compatible with recycling systems.

Moving forward

So while the pandemic increased the use of single-use plastic and other packaging, Picard says that the feeling among business leaders who are deeply involved in the value chain is that it was a temporary blip. And perhaps in the long run it has even strengthened the case for more sustainable and safe packaging –throwing society's dependence on a certain amount of these items into the limelight, as it did.

"I think there has been a big shift in the market and we will never go back," says Picard.

Likewise for Schuster: "Packaging is here to stay. So the question is, what can we do to make it more sustainable?"

[Click here to read more on how Henkel works on creating a circular economy for its packaging](#)

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