

The Role of Companies and Consumers in Food Packaging Environmental Sustainability

Packaging is an important part of the safety, quality and overall experience of consuming food. If you look at the delicate gold packaging of a Ferrero Rocher chocolate candy, you can tell it is purposefully designed to evoke a certain kind of experience for the consumer. While the visual design of food packaging has the potential to influence a person's perspective of a product, society is beginning to look beyond what meets the eye when choosing which foods to spend their money on. The environmental sustainability of food packaging is playing an increasingly vital role in the consciousness of society, which presents an opportunity for both food production companies and consumers to embrace positive change and continuous learning.

As consumer consciousness around sustainability rises, a growing number of food companies are putting more focus on environmentally friendly packaging. As explained in the article *Consumers' Awareness, Behavior and Expectations for Food Packaging Environmental Sustainability: Influence of Socio-Demographic Characteristics* (Chirilli, C.; Molino, M.; Torri, L), there are three main areas of focus for food packaging to be sustainable; '1) raw materials and the preference of recycled and renewable resources to decrease CO2 emissions and fossil fuels, 2) more energy efficient processes to make the product, and lastly, 3) the ability for reuse, recycling and biodegradation'. These three areas of focus provide a path for both companies and consumers to follow in order to be more environmentally sustainable in every aspect of the food packaging journey.

London-based food and beverage packaging company, Packamama, is striving to make progress in all three of these areas of focus for food packaging environmental sustainability. The Packamama website highlights the positive environmental impacts of the company's main product; a flat wine bottle. The flat design serves a number of purposes that provide value from an economic and environmental perspective. The bottle itself is made of 100% recyclable materials and although it still holds the same amount of wine as a typical wine bottle, the narrower footprint cuts down on the packaging materials, freight space and logistics emissions. This innovative packaging product has a positive environmental and economic impact along the entire production journey of a wine bottle.

Packamama is an example of a company using creative innovation to make a positive impact on the environment. However, the well-established processes and traditions of the wine industry create a challenging environment for change or innovation. Similar to many sustainability pioneers, Packamama must face the difficult task of winning over people who are not interested in or supportive of their pioneering idea. As stated in the article *Creating the Big Shift: System Innovation for Sustainability* by Stephanie Draper, this phase of achieving significant change is called enabling the tipping point. According to Draper, this step requires taking an innovative idea from niche to mainstream.

Draper explains that one of the main techniques to scale-up an idea is to understand behavior change. In the example of Packamama's flat wine bottle, both the behavior of companies and consumers are important factors to consider. As it relates to wine companies, incorporating a flat bottle into their production line might mean that they have to incur costs to change certain aspects of

their manufacturing process. If they are a company that does not prioritize environmental sustainability, it is not likely that they will be willing to make these investments. If a consumer is at the market looking for wine, they are more likely to buy a bottle that they are familiar with. The optics and functionality of the flat bottle may not align with their normal wine consumption behaviors. If they have a wine rack at home, they may wonder how the flat bottle will fit on the round rack. This is a small example of the many behavioral changes that need to be understood and addressed in order for an innovative idea to overcome the tipping point and move from niche to mainstream. This process can't be understood without exploring the role that emotions play in innovative ideas becoming widely accepted.

As stated in the article *Leading Organizations Through The Stages of Grief: The Development of Negative Emotions Over Environmental Change* (Friedrich, E. and Wüstenhagen, R., 2017), 'we react more positively to changes that are in line with our beliefs and norms and tend to deny the ones that are against them'. Friedrich and Wüstenhagen talk about this in the context of business leadership, which relates to food companies and how they react to climate change. If a company does not prioritize environmental sustainability as part of their overall business strategy, it is unlikely they will see the value in creating environmentally sustainable packaging. This is where consumers can use their monetary spending power to help push these companies to start acting in a more environmentally sustainable way by only buying these types of products. Although many consumers are trying to align their purchasing power with their values of being more environmentally sustainable, many consumers do not have enough scientific information on environmentally sustainable food packaging to make informed decisions. This knowledge gap creates ample opportunity for companies to simply utilize marketing and design strategies rather than actually applying real scientific solutions to make a positive impact on environmental issues.

The lack of environmental sustainability knowledge among consumers leads to a lack of accountability for companies and leaders who are responsible for making decisions related to food packaging. A growing amount of research is being conducted on consumer perspectives of sustainable packaging. A review titled *Food Packaging and Sustainability: Consumer Perception vs. Correlated Scientific Facts* (Sarah Otto, Mara Strenger, Andrea Maier-Noth, Markus Schmid) aims to answer the question of whether or not consumers are properly informed about aspects of the environmental sustainability of food packaging. As explained in the article, '*from the consumers' point of view, sustainable packaging is a packaging design that exhibits environmental friendliness. Most consumers state that food packaging plays an important role for their choice of product. This relevance has shown an increase in recent years and will increase further in the future.*'

This data provides a promising outlook for the future of environmental progress in society. However, it is important for consumers to understand more aspects of environmental sustainability and how it relates to food packaging so that they can make more informed decisions and hold companies more accountable for their actions. The research on this topic shows that consumers use many physical and visual cues, such as color or texture, to determine if something is environmentally friendly or not. For example, if something is in a green package, the consumer may be more likely to associate it with aspects of environmental sustainability and they may perceive something to be recyclable because the packaging looks natural. The article data concluded that '*the consumer perception differs highly from the scientific conclusion of environmentally friendly sustainable packaging*'. While it is positive that society is increasingly conscious of the circular economy as it

relates to environmentalism, consumer knowledge also needs to increase and companies can do better in trying to provide consumers with meaningful food packaging information.

It is not sufficient to rely on companies to make the decision on their own to become advocates for environmentally sustainable food packaging. As mentioned in the *Food Packaging and Sustainability: Consumer Perception vs. Correlated Scientific Facts* article, policy makers should require stricter 'eco-labeling'. This would require transparent packaging information for consumers to understand if products are truly environmentally sustainable or not. The article also mentions the idea of a predetermined environmental sustainability rating system shown on packaging labels. Just as society has learned to read food nutrition health labels, they would have the opportunity to learn how to assess the environmental sustainability of food packaging through more rigorous eco-labeling labeling requirements. These ideas would empower consumers to make more informed decisions and it would hold companies accountable for being more environmentally friendly with their food packaging decisions and actions.

Innovative ideas such as eco-labeling are not yet past the tipping point of becoming mainstream, however, it is already clear that food companies who embrace environmental sustainability as part of their overall business strategy are setting themselves up to be more agile and competitive now and in the future. It is no secret that companies can influence consumer behavior. If companies are proactive with their food packaging eco-labelling, they can guide consumers to make more informed decisions that contribute to the circular economy and make positive strides towards society becoming more environmentally sustainable. Through this, consumers can gain more knowledge and companies who are prioritizing environmental sustainability may have a greater opportunity for economic profit.

Italian confectionery company, Ferrero, announced in 2019 that they aim to make 100% of their packaging reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025. This was announced in the 10th edition of their annual sustainability report. Lapo Civiletti, the CEO of Ferrero, stated in the report that "*we have growth ambitions and what is key is instilling sustainability throughout our entire business. This new commitment for packaging is an important step to achieving this.*" Additionally, the company also announced that they signed the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's New Plastics Economy Global Commitment which promotes a circular economy for plastic. The foundation was founded in 2018 in partnership with the UN Environment Programme.

According to the foundation website, the aim of the group is to bring together '*businesses, governments, and other organizations from around the world behind a common vision of a circular economy for plastic, in which it never becomes waste or pollution*'. There are over 500 signatory members that have committed to start working towards the foundations' vision for the future of plastics. The vision is based on three focus areas; elimination, innovation and circulation of plastics. The foundation provides information, guidance and objectives around these three focus areas for the signatory members. The foundation also provides publicly-available progress reports on their key targets, which helps to create transparency and accountability. The 500 signatory members make up 20% of all plastic packaging produced globally. While this mission is a step forward in the right direction, that percentage is still far too small to make the kind of impact needed for significant widespread change in the elimination, innovation and circulation of plastics. The foundation's website also states that they are aware that not all members will hit their targets by 2025. This is unfortunate

but it strongly reinforces the need for more information and accountability related to plastics and environmental sustainability.

Companies that are sourcing, manufacturing and selling packaged foods have a big opportunity and responsibility to make a positive impact on environmental sustainability. Perceived environmental sustainability can be very different from actual environmental sustainability, especially when it comes to food packaging. The perception and reality of this situation currently seem to be a gray area for many companies and consumers. It is important for both companies and consumers to do their part in learning about and being accountable for environmental sustainability as it relates to food packaging. Companies have a large platform to provide meaningful education on this topic, which can help guide consumers to make informed decisions and care more about environmentalism. Consumers have the power to influence company decision-makers with their spending habits by only opting to buy products that are made in an environmentally sustainable way. In order to bring environmentally sustainable food packaging into the mainstream consciousness of society, both companies and consumers need to understand and accept that they are in a position to create positive change and make an impact.

CITATIONS

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