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Making packaging sustainable

Why education, proactivity and proof
are imperative for lasting change.



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Overview

Think food packaging, and your mind can be forgiven if it immediately jumps to discarded wrappers littering the street and plastic bottles floating in our waterways.

Those scenarios are all too common, and can create image problems for the brands that have inadvertently ended up littering our world.

And yet, of course, food packaging is an essential component in the farm-to-fork supply chain.

Not only does it help protect, preserve and contain produce – helping it arrive at its destination damage-free and in the right condition for human consumption – it also plays a hugely important role in conveying information, branding and marketing messages.

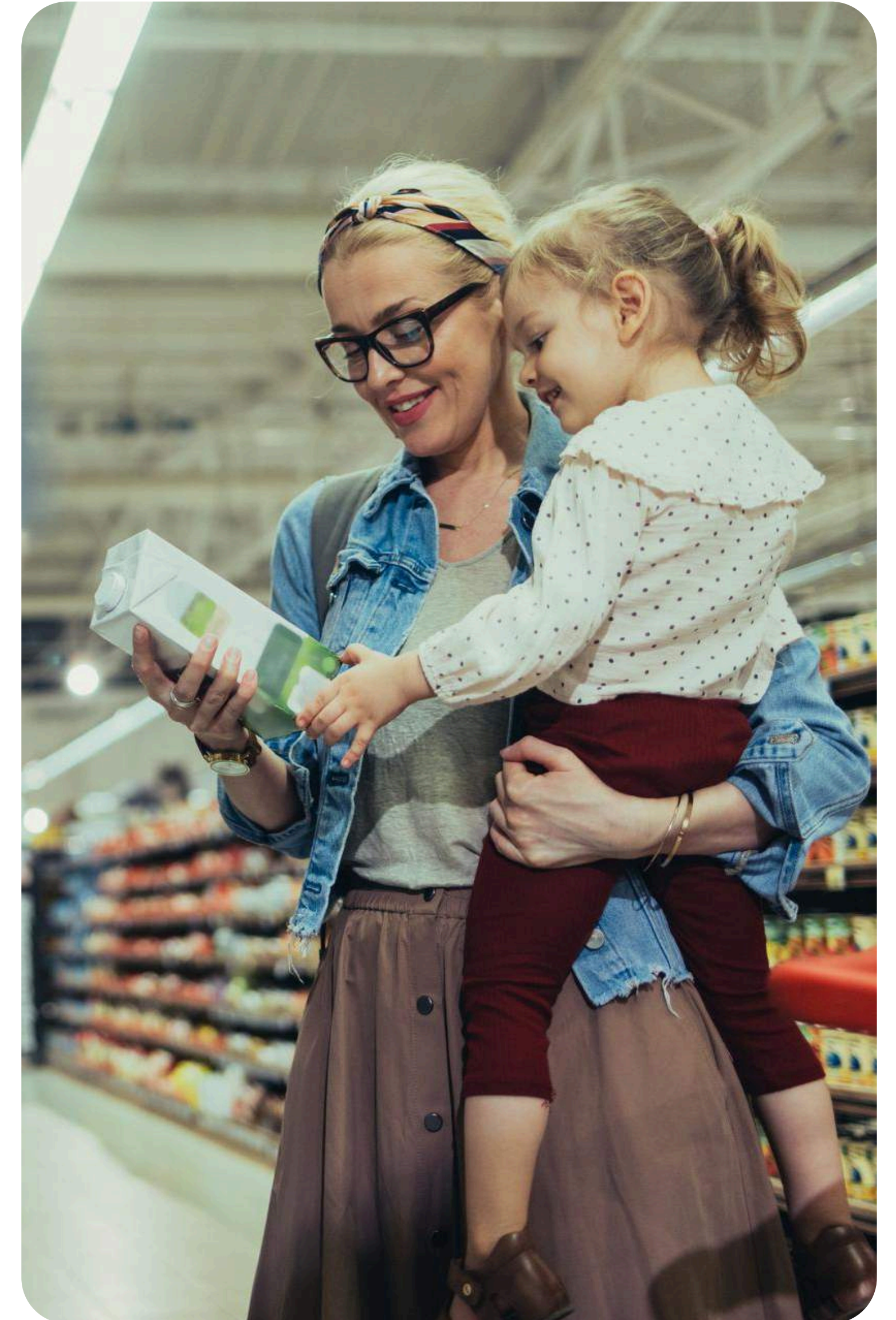
Packaging only exists in the context of the product inside it: it helps prevent food from becoming waste, increases shelf life, and creates a recognisable brand and product for businesses and consumers alike.

Packaging, naturally, has evolved greatly over the years as supply chains have grown from local to international and consumerism has risen exponentially.

The 'reuse' model of milk and soft drink bottles has been replaced by 'take, make, dispose'. However, the disposal infrastructure hasn't always been adequate – particularly when, as a society, we seek to move towards a circular economy. The infrastructure to recycle consistently or reuse existing packaging isn't always there.

Brands need their packaging to be sustainable, to contribute consistently to the circular economy. But often it's easier said than done. That's not to say the packaging industry has failed to progress – far from it. It has always been adept at innovating; from light weighting and right weighting to using recycled materials, the sector has continually innovated while balancing business realities and customer demands.

There's always more that can be done, and the risks of reputational damage and accusations of greenwashing are ever-present. Brands need certainty that they're doing the right thing in the right way.





Packaging causing consumer headaches

However, food packaging is an immense source of confusion for consumers too – particularly when it comes to what can be recycled and what cannot.

That can vary from region to region, country to country, as different authorities invest in different recycling capabilities. It's virtually impossible for anyone to act consistently with any certainty.

And that's a challenge, because today, consumers expect brands to play a leading role in decreasing the environmental impact they have. Consumers are increasingly demanding the brands they choose to be associated with and purchase from are doing the right thing from an environmental perspective.

Sustainable packaging is a major component of that, and the expectation is that brands play a full part in the circular economy, so food packaging can be recycled or reused, minimizing waste as much as possible.

That's a problem for brands to solve, however, the food packaging that brands create is only one part of what is a complex equation.

The need to change packaging perception

Volumes and styles of food packaging are a direct response to consumer demand – and as brands reassess and reevaluate their food packaging with a sustainability lens, it's important too to consider the role of education as part of a sustainability strategy.

Consumer demand for 365/24/7 availability of previously seasonal produce, for example, has been willingly met by businesses focused solely on their customers and their bottom line. However, is the packaging required to fulfill that demand – not to mention the resultant carbon footprint – truly worth it?

If consumers knew the true environmental impact of having a year-round supply of certain products, would their appetites change?

While packaging is just one aspect of a sustainable food supply chain, it influences many touch points – from reducing food waste and determining the volume of produce that can be transported, to educating consumers about how the product – and packaging – impacts the environment.





Direct action needed

Brands, can also be influential in helping to close the loop in the circular economy by becoming directly involved in the management of packaging materials at the end of use, often recycling , and ultimately increasing consumer education and changing consumer behaviour.

The brands that get their sustainable packaging strategy right have a significant early-mover advantage and a hugely important and newsworthy story to tell.

But where to start? A holistic approach is needed – one that takes into account everything from where packaging raw materials came from and how it came into being, to ensuring it's the most efficient solution and is managed effectively at the end of its life.



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Creating sustainable packaging



Creating sustainable packaging

While changing consumer behaviour, attitudes and expectations is something brands have some influence over, packaging is an aspect over which they have greater control.

By being able to identify weak links in the chain and opportunities for improvement through a life cycle approach, brands can enhance their sustainability credentials while simultaneously reducing the risk of damage to brand reputation.

The circular economy is a hugely important aspect of most industries today, so knowing what will happen to the packaging after it's been used for food creates significant transparency.

For example, is the packaging suitable for the country it's going to? In the UK, for example, which has a recycling system, biodegradable products aren't as imperative.

Introducing biodegradable or compostable packaging materials can have unintended consequences on littering, and established waste management streams.

In some countries, however, they may be one of the few packaging types that are genuinely sustainable.

Of course, an opportunity exists – particularly for global companies – to help establish material management facilities, where needed, in those countries they export to, and contribute to creating that infrastructure.

In terms of good news stories, that would rank highly.





Factors to consider when creating sustainable packaging

- 1 Weight**
Is the material used for packaging the product the lightest it could be? Could the weight be reduced without adversely affecting the product?
- 2 Material**
Is the packaging material manageable, perhaps through recycling, in the country it's destined for? Could a material be used that has a smaller environmental footprint?
- 3 Shape and size**
Does the shape of the packaging maximize the space in which it's transported? For example, a box solution may enable the same product volumes to be packaged within less space when compared with an irregularly shaped jar. By changing your packaging, can more units fit on a pallet?
- 4 Volume**
Are the products packaged in volumes that meet the needs of the end customer? For example, could moving to selling only greater volumes of long-life products save packaging costs and impact?



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The consumer factor

Conflicting demands at play



The consumer factor

Satisfying consumer demand is a challenge for food brands – particularly when it comes to packaging.

On one hand, there's greater awareness of the environmental impact brands have and a demand to minimize the footprint they leave. On the other, there's a consistent market and heightened expectations of products being available on-demand, regardless of season.

For example, fruits and vegetables that were previously only available for certain periods of the year when local conditions allowed are now expected 365 days of the year – without a great deal of thought to the environmental impact.

Certain products are expected to look and feel premium. Would a bottle of wine be willingly exchanged for a carton containing the same product?

It's unlikely – but why?

Consumer education has a huge role to play here, and that has got to be led by brands. Similarly, some firm views are held by consumers about certain types of packaging – plastics, for example – however, they're not always informed.

Take cucumbers, for instance. Without plastic, they would struggle to make it into our homes, never mind our stores, due to the incredibly high water content. Meat, too. Without plastic, its shelf life would be significantly reduced.

Of course, some products don't actually need a great deal of retail packaging – many fruits and vegetables spring to mind.

Do we really need bottled water? In some countries, maybe not – although we've all become very much accustomed to it. However, is the plastic bottle your water comes in actually recyclable and sustainable? If it is, it puts a different complexion on the purchase.

These stories need to be told – because consumers are confused and they're cynical. But they want to support brands that are doing this well. By communicating the stories of packaging – for example, the environmental benefits of supplying the same product in a differently sized or shaped package, the enormous positive impact of buying in different volumes and the reduction of food waste that packaging enables – the industry can begin enhancing the understanding of consumers. And in turn, they can make truly informed purchasing decisions.

Brands that challenge the packaging norms – either individually or collaboratively – could also create significant positive publicity.



Getting it right

In order to get full visibility and transparency throughout your packaging supply chain and identify areas of improvement, it's important to take a systematic, structured approach.

Standards provide best practice process recipes that detail what needs to be done and where opportunities for improvement lie – and there is always room for improvement.

These standards can help organizations determine which packaging formats are the most suitable for their supply chain as well as assess current packaging and determine what the environmental risk factors are.

Combined with storytelling from the brand itself, the potential impact for both the brand and the environment is immeasurable.



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Working with BSI

BSI supports organisation through their supply chain journey to become more sustainable, mitigate risks and recognises opportunities for a circular economy. Through use of best practice guidance, life-cycle assessment, and continuous improvement processes, real, tangible progress can be made in sustainability for packaging. Our packaging community collaborates to discover, define and design industry-centric solutions to global issues.

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