

Guest Feature: Facing the Sustainability Challenge

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Sustainability — it is clearly the hot topic of the day — you cannot turn the page in any periodical without reading about it. This is particularly true in the manufacturing and packaging worlds. But this "new" imperative is really not new at all. It is the continuation of a course of action that started more than a decade ago when there was a major focus on consumer waste, crowded landfills and the advent of widespread recycling programs. The focus today is on the use of excess materials and unnecessary resources throughout the manufacturing supply chain, with additional scrutiny on packaging.

This article will examine how products, techniques and, particularly, technologies can not only help manage various sustainability initiatives, but also increase brand strength and sales, maintain quality and efficiency, reduce costs and increase profit margins.

But first, some basics.

Why is sustainability important?

Regardless of how it is defined, sustainability is important because it is simply the right thing to do. It is clear that the supply of abundant resources we have come to take for granted is not infinite. Organizations must take seriously their environmental stewardship and social responsibility. If that were not enough, consumers are demanding sustainability as an attribute of the products they are purchasing. A recent Gfk Roper Green Gauge report indicated that 72 percent of consumers say that product and packaging labels are a source for the environmental information they use to make purchase decisions. Retailers and regulatory agencies worldwide have published requirements that add financial incentives, making sustainability metrics mandatory.



What are some of the challenges?

Technologies exist to help manage packaging components and the packaging process such that sustainability data is created as a by-product of the normal packaged design and development process. In a perfect world, packaging professionals go about the business of designing and developing packaging and when the process is complete, the sustainability data is automatically produced. For that to happen, certain challenges must be dealt with as part of the planning process. Here is a sample:

Lack of standards — While there are many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, working on standard sustainability metrics, this work has not coalesced into a standard dataset. Retailers have taken the lead, but each retailer has unique reporting requirements.

What to measure — Organizations must create a set of sustainability goals before any measurements are meaningful.

Why measure certain items — remembering that most of us work in a for-profit enterprise, it is important to measure items that pertain to sustainability, but also their effect on cost and margins. A terrific sustainability score that adds significant cost to packaging and therefore the consumer price may not be something to strive for.

How to measure — Recognize that everything about packaging is data. Everything. Each component that makes up the package, from the substrate to the sustainability information to a single ingredient in the ingredient panel on the label, is simply a single piece of data and should be managed as such. With this concept in mind, technology can easily capture and measure not only the sustainability data but also all data related to a package.

Where does the data exist — Wanting the data and knowing where the data exists are two very different things. The process must be studied to understand where the data exists as the package design and development process unfolds, so that data is captured at the point where it actually exists. We have all seen "forms" that have

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many blanks when returned for action. Many of these blanks exist because the form asks people to provide information that they simply do not have.

Who is responsible for the data — Analyze the process to understand the data responsibility. Often, the data we require already exists in a corporate system because of another process. If this is the case, it is much easier to automatically transfer data from one system to another instead of countless voicemails and emails flying around to gather this same data.

What techniques can be employed?

There are many things to consider relative to the capture and reporting of sustainability data. First and foremost is to understand the relationship between what is desired and what is available. While it is a valiant goal to attempt to attain 100 percent completeness in your data gathering, most organizations will simply never reach this goal. Not only is data difficult to gather inside your organization, but your upstream and downstream vendors also may have little experience in collecting useful data. Make a good-faith effort in collecting the data and do not let the inability to collect all the data you desire be a deterrent to the entire process.

Setting baselines will help begin the process of establishing best practices for data collection and measurement. The latest information, compared to the baseline, will indicate progress and will inform subsequent decisions.

Since 100 percent of the data is unlikely to be captured, it is important to create transparency for your sustainability reporting. It will be important for the readers of the information to understand what has been collected and measured and what has not, to avoid confusion and to maintain a stellar reputation.

Using technology properly will create automatic audit trails that do not create additional work for anyone in the supply chain.

What technologies can be employed?

There are several technologies that can be brought to bear in the area of sustainability. No single technology will accomplish all the objectives as each have their areas of specialization. Fortunately, with today's integration tools it is a fairly simple exercise to move information between systems.

Early in the process it is useful to have comparison tools that allow you to accomplish "what if" scenarios between different types of packaging. For example, when all is said and done throughout the supply chain, do we get better sustainability factors from using glass or PET?

For post-sale analysis, tools exist to add sales metrics by geography to the sustainability data such that retailer and regulatory bodies get the required data.

The main body of work, the packaging design and development, can be assisted by technology that is designed to be a set of data management, workflow

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management and reporting tools. Properly designed and implemented, this technology manages the data and the flow of a packaging project and ensures that the proper data is collected at exactly the right time by exactly the right people. Through the use of intelligent forms individual pieces of data are collected throughout the process and are later reassembled to produce a series of sustainability reports for both internal and external consumption. This data is not limited to simply the sustainability data, but also includes all data about the package, whether it be related to specifications, artwork, ingredients, regulatory, romance copy, etc.

An electronic workflow system keeps things on track by automatically moving the package through the design and development stages based on information from your best practices. These systems can manage the process from the early, informal integrations to the final, formal approval with the attendant regulatory requirements of some industries such as pharmaceutical.

These systems strive to make all data capture and reporting a simple by-product of packaging professionals doing what they do best: designing and developing packaging that is sustainable and cost effective. Most importantly it is packaging that flies off the shelf.

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