

Original Link: <https://www.quadpack.com/fragrance/articles/12142537/nuovi-materiali-per-un-packaging-sostenibile/>

Material changes in sustainable packaging

Sticking a plastic straw in a mojito these days is about as PC as ivory cufflinks. Single-use plastic is the new moral outrage. It has been banned at Wetherspoons and Pret a Manger, and now McDonald's is testing paper alternatives.

In the beauty packaging industry, however, single-use plastic remains the norm. Clearly, there are competitive advantages for brands that react to consumer demand – so why is it so hard to take positive action?

As Director of Design & Advanced Technologies at Quadpack Industries, I am immersed in debate and one thing has become abundantly clear. Going green in our sector is not quite as easy as might be thought, for a number of reasons.

Plastic alternatives

First of all, the obvious replacements for plastic are flawed. There are alternatives sourced from organic material, such as sugar cane. While sourced from a sustainable material, this biopolymer is not biodegradable and leaves micro-plastics. Even using wood is not a guarantee of sustainability if it is not sourced from certified forests.

The second problem is price. Brands may want to embrace more environmentally-friendly techniques across their supply chain, but are faced with cost implications. A switch to sustainable materials can often double the cost of the packaging. For products in a competitive marketplace, it may not be viable to pass these extra costs on to consumers.

The third challenge is the level of understanding of the options. Some of the larger organisations have specialists devoted to exploring sustainable solutions, but many do not. This lack of knowledge is making the transition to sustainable materials so much harder.

Material breakthroughs

If all that sounds gloomy, now it is time for the good news. There are solutions. In terms of materials, new technology is providing the breakthroughs we have been waiting for. For example,

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Sulapac, with whom we partner, produces a material made from wood chip and natural binders. It is water and oil resistant and is also truly biodegradable. It is potentially a game changer, offering all of the benefits of plastic without the plastic waste problem.

As scale kicks in, the cost of materials will fall, helping to break down the cost barriers. Also, our creative team routinely designs with sustainability in mind, for example, light-weighting where possible, which reduces cost impact. In any case, new products often bear a higher price, as consumers make up their minds about an acceptable price tag.

A massive plus is the attitude of the industry. Brands want to improve – this can be seen in the rise of life-cycle assessments – and consumer habits are also changing. Millennials care deeply about the environment. Brands that take the lead on sustainability can leap-frog cautious rivals.

Importantly, the investment climate is backing sustainable practices. Banks are embracing ESG (environment, social and governance) investment principles. The Norwegian sovereign fund, worth a trillion dollars, and French investment bank Société Generale, are prioritising ESG-compliant funds. They regard the risk-return matrix as superior, as responsible brands are less vulnerable to scandals and consumer desertion. The performance of ESG indexes support this, outperforming rival benchmarks, such as emerging markets, since 2012.

A positive outlook

What this adds up to is an industry with serious challenges, but a growing arsenal of solutions. Progress is slow but, at Quadpack, our plan is to guide the industry in the right direction. This year, we implemented a comprehensive CSR strategy. We have a sustainable packaging team dedicated to increasing our range of environmentally-friendly materials. Our wood factory is certified by the FSC and PEFC. We work with genuinely sustainable materials like Sulapac and team up with researchers across the globe to find new alternatives. We take the initiative on design. Even if you don't ask, we will usually come up with design changes which can save weight and improve the footprint of your product. As a global company – with offices in Europe, the US and Asia – we have the ability to harness innovation no matter where it happens. Together with our industry colleagues, we can make a huge impact in this complex but critical mission.

– Jeremy Garrard, Director of Design & Advanced Technologies

This article appeared in the Raconteur supplement 'The Future of Packaging' in The Times on 18 July 2018. [Read the full publication here.](#)

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About Quadpack Industries SA

Quadpack Industries is an international manufacturer and a provider of enhanced packaging solutions for beauty brand owners and contract fillers. With offices and production facilities in Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific region and a strategic network of manufacturing partners, Quadpack develops bespoke and customised packs for prestige, masstige and mass market customers. For more information, please visit www.quadpack.com.



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