



October 2017

FEATURE

# PACKAGE DEAL

The trend toward eco-friendly packaging is gaining momentum

By Jerry Soverinsky

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In 1988, citing research conducted by Alaska-based researchers that measured plastic garbage floating in the North Pacific Ocean, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) published a paper describing a “Great Pacific garbage patch,” a floating mass of neustonic plastic in the North Pacific, Bering Sea and Japan Sea.

While the mass survives today, don’t bother searching for evidence on Google Earth or back issues of *National Geographic*. The plastic island is comprised of very tiny, nearly invisible pieces; one study “found 334,271 pieces of plastic per square kilometer of ocean surface, but these pieces weighed only ... about 11 pounds.” That’s about 15 milligrams per fragment, as much as a grass seed.

All of which makes cleaning the mess impossible, an ecological wasteland that promises to fester for decades. Worse, the particles are consumed by marine wildlife, by itself a health hazard, and one compounded as the plastic absorbs organic pollutants, such as PCBs, DDT and PAHs. The marine wildlife is then consumed by jellyfish, which are consumed by fish, which are then consumed by ... humans.

**“Whether it’s plastic cutlery, Styrofoam packaging or single-use bags, you may need to adopt alternative, environmentally friendly packaging to meet more stringent local laws.”**

The cycle of life, indeed.

It’s any one of these ill effects that have prompted a decades-long effort to curtail the use of plastic. Until recently, the choice of paper or plastic has been voluntary, one influenced by social conscience, cost and even performance. But more recently, municipalities have been regulating usage, small pockets of activity that collectively have been gaining momentum.

If you deal in foodservice, the momentum is especially notable, as change may be coming your way. For whether it’s plastic cutlery,

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Styrofoam packaging or single-use bags, you may need to adopt alternative, environmentally friendly packaging to meet more stringent local laws. Or even if your area stays with the status quo, you may decide to pursue a reduced carbon footprint as a voluntary, socially responsible pursuit. In either case, here's what you should know.

## Regulating Change

Earlier this year, the city of Vancouver, Canada, announced plans to reduce the use of single-use, foodservice packaging products (disposable cups, plastic bags, foam packaging, etc.) as part of a long-term goal of making the city a zero-waste community by 2040. "Vancouver is not alone," said Cliff Albert, vice president of sales and marketing, North America, for Seda International Packaging Group. "The trend is for increased regulation, and if you map it (where regulations are being enacted), you can see the tidal wave coming ... We don't know where it will all shake out."

Packaging regulations have been growing momentum "for some time" in Europe and elsewhere, Albert said, part of a conscious effort to reduce landfill waste. Indeed, last year, France became the first country in the world to ban single-use plastic cups and plates, a law that takes effect in 2020. Just a few months later, Costa Rica announced that it, too, intends to eliminate single-use plastic by 2021, part of its goal of becoming carbon neutral.

Back at home, we've seen pockets of change, some that have experienced a few hiccups along the way. In 2014, California passed a law banning the use of single-use plastic bags, following the earlier leads of San Francisco, San Jose and Los Angeles County. On the other coast, however, New York City banned—for the second time—the use of polystyrene food containers, to take effect in mid-November (a 2013 law slated to take effect in mid-2015 was overturned prior to enactment). But stay tuned: A city councilman has proposed a bill that would add polystyrene to the list of recyclable materials, thus preserving its usage.

New York's battling bills saga should sound a warning note for retailers, who are often caught up in conflicting regulations. "Retailers often don't know what to do," Albert said. "My advice is to take yourself out of [the conflict]. If you're using a product that's in someone's crosshairs, it's time to think about an alternative before you're told you have to."

## Taking Stock of Your Stock

While identifying such "at-risk" products may be easy, finding suitable replacements can be complicated. As a first step in the process, Lynn Dyer, president of the Foodservice Packaging Institute, urges retailers to evaluate their needs. "[At FPI], we survey operators and we ask them the criteria they use for foodservice packaging. Most people say they want green packaging or eco-friendly packaging, but it almost always comes down to two things: performance and cost. And those are essential."

**“Our efforts need not be pursued in isolation—suppliers are eager to lend a hand in your packaging conversion.”**

As for the first, performance must meet the demands of the c-store customer. "The market for convenience and eating on the go will continue to drive the need for packages that maintain the food presentation and quality, are easy to open and reclose, and can perform in hot or cold applications," said Maureen Stapleton, director of marketing for Anchor Packaging, Inc., whose company has eschewed foam packaging (Stapleton

### BYOP (bring your own packaging)

In an effort to eliminate packaging waste, some Canadian retailers are pursuing "zero waste" stores that require customers to bring their own containers—everything from bags to jars to Tupperware. Vancouver's Zero Waste Market is one such store, a "100% package-free grocery store," according to its owner, Brianne Miller, whose store walls are lined with roughly 200 bulk dispensers.

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cites foam's "poor lid seal causing messy spills" as a performance failure) in lieu of polypropylene (PP) and polyethylene terephthalate (PET/PETE), which meet all performance criteria as well as the company's 3R test: reduce, reuse, recycle.

As for the cost component, Dyer understands that price margins are thin for c-store operators, a critical consideration of the packaging discussion. "If it's much more expensive, the c-store operator may not be able to absorb that. On the other hand, you must also think about what your customers are asking for."

Next, understand that your efforts need not be pursued in isolation—suppliers are eager to lend a hand in your packaging conversion. "We value the opportunity to work together with all of our partners, and it's great to see our retail customers making efforts to reduce their impact on the environment," said Sarah Dearman, sustainable packaging program director for The Coca-Cola Company. "We help retailers reduce waste by ensuring the majority of our packages are easily recyclable. We even collaborate with some customers to communicate to consumers the importance of recycling, inspiring additional actions."

But even that straightforward goal may require a bit more navigation, as "recyclable" just may depend on the meaning of ... well ... "recyclable."

**“You’re using a product that’s in someone’s crosshairs, it’s time to think about an alternative before you’re told you have to.”**

"Some communities require recyclable packaging, which typically favors plastic packaging, although what a given community accepts for recycling varies widely," said Amy Waterman, global marketing communications manager for Berry Global Group, Inc., a manufacturer of plastic consumer packaging and engineered materials. "Some communities require compostable packaging, which typically favors fiber packaging. And some

communities outright ban certain materials. This complex maze of regulations makes it very difficult for foodservice operators to streamline their packaging and can significantly affect their operational efficiency."

To combat these and other uncertainties, Dyer advocates that a piecemeal approach is sometimes necessary—definitely not a matter of convenience. "Because every community dictates differently, that's where it gets complicated, especially for c-stores. They need to be aware of what's going on and purchase permissible items for that community ... If you want to buy recyclable or compostable products, for instance, you need to know if you can do that in your community."

## Doing the Right Thing

Absent local or state requirements, some retailers are still opting for change, a matter prompted by social responsibility, not mandate. For Pennsylvania-based Rutter's, their efforts have focused on customer education and recycling, a corporate-wide commitment to doing the right thing. "Rutter's has been offering recycling across all our stores for over a decade," said Derek Gaskins, chief customer officer for Rutter's. "We have branded recycling containers on the porches of all our stores to encourage consumers to recycle newspapers, bottles, cans and other items we sell."

In 2016, Rutter's partnered with Penn Waste on a recycling campaign, educating its customers on the benefits and how-to's of recycling foodservice packaging. "Consumers continue to demand more from their favorite retailers and brands ... We are constantly exploring more effective packaging, and eco-friendly options that also deliver more value to consumers are certainly on our radar."

## Banning the Ban

In the meantime, not every region is trending toward green. In late 2016, Michigan Lieutenant Governor Brian

**Edible Packaging**

Calley signed into law a bill that would prohibit local governments within the state from banning or imposing fees on the use of plastic bags and other packaging, a move praised by the Michigan Restaurant Association (MRA). “With many of our members owning and operating locations across the state, preventing a patchwork approach of additional regulations is imperative to avoid added complexities as it related to day-to-day business operations,” said Robert O’Meara, vice president of government affairs for MRA.

Some suppliers are thinking outside the box when it comes to packaging, moving beyond “reuse” and focusing on “repurpose.” Enter the Ooho, an edible water-toting capsule created by London-based Skipping Rocks Lab. (Don’t worry—if the taste of the container is unsettling, it’s also biodegradable.)

Such an approach is likely to prove an outlier, Albert said, who sees the trend firmly on the side of change, with retailers responding accordingly. “Customers don’t want to be pulled aside and told not to use this or that and then find themselves in a position where they can’t respond.

“Because we don’t know what’s going to happen, we encourage retailers to be on the front end of things.”

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