

WASTE PREVENTION & PACKAGING

How to measure prevention?

At a constant consumption the decrease of the weight of packaging is the measure of prevention efficiency.

From this point of view excess packaging is on the decline. In fact the producers revalue their packaging not only because they are pushed towards an environmental way but first of all for economic reasons. Raw materials and energy are not only more and more expensive but the financial contribution to the green dot system developed by the industry of packaging increases with the weight of the packaging.

Those 2 economic reasons are enough to motivate the reconsideration of packaging.

Regularly and now for more than 10 years, French producers as well as Italians and others have been publishing directories with the changes applied to their packaging.

To day's plastic bottles for sparkling water are often too light. When you open them you loose the inner pressure and you create a geyser because the bottle has no more mechanical resistance to the pressure of your hand. If we continue to reduce the plastic thickness we will have bottles with only on side!

Twenty years ago, when we bought a hammer in a DIY centre it was packed in a blister. Nowadays this packaging is replaced by a little sticker on the handle of the hammer. This won't save the world but it is a positive example we frequently come across these days.

In other respects, packaging may be considered as overpackaging for someone but necessary for the producer.

Let us consider the case of biscuits but it would be the same for coffee or other goods.

If I buy biscuits I expect that they have a pleasant smell, a good taste and are crispy even if I buy them wherever in the world and several months after their production.

In this case the producer will make packaging which will be impermeable to oxygen of the air to avoid the souring which spoils the taste and the smell, it will be a water-repellent to keep the biscuits crispy and finally grease impermeable to avoid the migration of the grease outside the packaging.

The best solution in this case is a plastic foil but not a simple foil because most of them used in packaging are real colanders on a molecular level, which is the level to be considered when the shelf life of goods covers several months or years in different conservations conditions. So the plastic foil will be coated with 5 microns of PVDC for instance which is a real barrier to oxygen, grease and water vapor. Moreover, PVDC is thermo sealable and even the seal plays

the role of a barrier. As a consumer I want to buy unbroken biscuits so the whole will be put in a cardboard box.

Non specialists would consider that it would be better to use only cardboard coated with PVDC. In that case to have the same efficiency as a plastic foil coated with 5 microns of PVDC we have to coat the cardboard with 30gr PVDC per square meter in 2 or 3 coating steps.

This last solution which seems simpler is in fact more expensive and environmentally unfriendly.

You must keep in mind that packaging is a real science and a simple change in production may cost a lot of money.

Solutions which seem simpler for laymen may be in fact more expensive and environmentally unfriendly.

Several people will suggest increasing the sale of goods in bulk. This is not so easy as we have to consider standards of public health, safety and legal information.

If you buy tomatoes in bulk in a supermarket, you need anyway a little plastic bag to weigh your purchase which you will tie and stick the price for the check-out counter. Generally people choose the tomatoes by touching them and moreover they never take the ones which are blemished, over-ripe or too soft by the touch. At the end of the day, most of the remaining tomatoes are just good for the dustbin.

When tomatoes are packed on a cardboard and wrapped with plastic, it's the tray which is taken in the hand and not the tomatoes. All the tomatoes so packed are sold and at the end of the day the remaining trays are still saleable.

In fact, the role of packaging starts at the producer's plant where a lack of packaging adapted for transport induces a loss of goods: 2 % in our countries, 38 % in Asia and 50 % in Brazil.

So if on the one hand we state that the general individual weight of packaging is going down on the other hand the number and the diversity of packaging is continually growing pushed by advertising on TV, newspapers and so on.

Our way of living reduces our family life and we have no longer enough time to cook.

Consequently, meals are taken in a haphazard way with the increasing success of takeaway dishes, cleaned and washed vegetables and an explosion of individual portions

It would be possible to curb this behavior by forbidding advertising or reducing the purchasing power but forget it because it's unthinkable.

All that together shows that if we want to measure the efficiency of prevention we have to observe the evolution of the global household waste. A reduction of this will be a positive signal of prevention.

If we want to reduce the weight of our waste it's the consumer who must be educated.

When there is a problem the first reaction is to accuse the industry which is considered as a black sheep.

But what are the public authorities doing? In my opinion there is a lack of action!

Why don't we impose in each school a selective collection of waste and explain the utility of it. We have to start as early as possible and we have to maintain the motivation during all schooltime.

Here we are expecting a decision of public authorities

We complain about the obesity of our children but what are we doing against that? Do we forbid the distributors of candy bars or soft drinks in the schools? No! There are some isolated initiatives in that field but this should be compulsory and general. Such a position won't be taken voluntarily by the owner of the distributor because it's his business and if he is clever the school will be interested in the profit. This is also a reason why schools are not motivated to ban those distributors.

Here also we are expecting a decision of public authorities

My conclusion is: if we want to reduce our packaging waste or more generally our household waste the most efficient way is through the education of the consumer we are. This conscientious approach must be learned as early as possible.

This doesn't mean that we don't have to push the producers to optimize their packaging but today the expected reduction of waste in our countries obtained this way is peanuts in my opinion in comparison with the one we could reach with the eco-education of the consumer.

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