

Paper Packaging The Natural Choice

The Facts

Well-designed, efficiently produced, appropriately used and responsibly disposed-of packaging provides multiple benefits. It is essential to prevent product damage and can help extend a product's life. It helps improve efficiency in the supply chain and provides safe and convenient access to goods. Packaging communicates vital information to the customer whilst providing a great 'unboxing experience' to those receiving gifts or luxury items. However, poor material choices are damaging to both brands and the planet.

The impact on the environment caused by discarded man-made materials has reached critical levels.

There is now a greater need than ever for packaging to be sustainable throughout its life cycle. Packaging should incorporate eco-design at its inception, use responsibly sourced raw materials, and be manufactured using efficient processes that are driven by renewable energy. Packaging should be re-used or recycled wherever possible, then sent to the most appropriate end-of-life solution, such as incineration for energy generation or composting.

Paper packaging is part of the solution. Paper packaging is made from wood fibre, a natural and renewable material that is highly recycled.

The Sustainable Choice

The key raw material for making paper packaging is cellulose fibre from trees, a natural and renewable and is a highly recycled raw material.

Virgin fibre is sourced from sustainably managed forests. Despite consumer perception, European forests are growing in size. Between 2005 and 2020, European forest cover grew by 58,390km^2 – an area larger than Switzerland and equivalent to 1,500 football pitches of forest growth every day.[1]

> *"In 2021, the European paper-based packaging recycling rate was 83% – the highest of any packaging material."*
>
> Eurostat, 2021

Paper and cardboard is the most recycled packaging material in Europe. In 2021, 83% of all paper-based packaging was recycled, outperforming metallic packaging (75%), glass packaging (74%), and far exceeding that of plastic packaging (41%).[2]

In Europe, paper fibres are recycled and re-used 3.5 times on average.[3] However, laboratory experiments have shown fibre can be recycled significantly more, up to 25 times.[4] Developing efficiencies in recycling processes, improving collection systems and increasing consumer action may one day help realise this potential.

> *"The European paper packaging industry aims to reach an ambitious recycling rate of 90% by 2030."*
>
> 4evergreen, 2021

Product Protection

Packaging plays an essential role in minimising damage and extending a product's life. Without appropriate packaging, there would be a greater risk of the resources used to make the product being wasted.

The global pandemic had a huge impact on how consumers shop and how brands and retailers sell products. As consumers increasingly moved to online shopping, for groceries to high-end luxury items, the demand for transit packaging increased significantly. The dramatic rise in e-commerce amid movement restrictions induced by Covid-19 increased online retail sales' share of total retail sales from 16% to 19% in 2020.[5]

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There are many different types of paper packaging, circular by nature, used and suitable for both product and transit packaging. Examples include:

- **Corrugated Boxes** - Often referred to as brown boxes, are typically used for protection in the bulk movement of goods. A corrugated box is a multi-layered paper product which has unrivalled strength to weight ratio, making it extremely resource efficient and beneficial from a logistics (weight) perspective. 93% of the fibre used to produce corrugated board in Europe comes from paper for recycling[6], providing a sustainable use for recovered paper in the paper cycle.
- **Cartonboard Boxes** – Manufactured from what is known as folding boxboard (FBB), cartonboard boxes are versatile and widely used to contain and protect products such as: cereals, medicines, confectionary to high-end luxury items such as perfume and whiskey boxes. Cartonboard boxes offer an excellent combination of product protection, lightweight construction and a great print surface.
- **Beverage Cartons** – Versatile, multi-layered construction can be used to pack a wide array of liquids. The biggest market for cartons are; food (soups) and beverages (milk and juices), but recent moves by retailers and brand owners to eliminate unnecessary single-use packaging has seen the format used to package other home care liquids such as detergents.
- **Dry Food and Pet Food Bags** - Brand owners and retailers have been packaging dry foods in uncoated mono-material "block bottom" paper bags for decades. Despite the simplicity of this packaging there are several reasons these bags remain important. These bags are strong, easy and fast to fill, stackable on pallets, fully recyclable (containing no plastic), fully biodegradable, economical and attractive.
- **Paper E-Commerce Mailing Bags** – An alternative to Polybags made from LDPE (derived from oil, a fossil fuel). The paper alternative has significant environmental benefits. Made from renewable material, recyclable through normal municipal waste collections and biodegradable. An LCA study published in 2020 concluded that the carbon footprint of a virgin paper mailing bag was significantly lower than plastic-based alternatives.[7]
- **Industrial Paper Sacks** - Strong and durable, allowing for weights of up to 25kg to be packaged safely. Paper grades, made specifically for this purpose, use long and strong wood fibre. Typically virgin fibre, which can be recycled, the paper quality and sack construction combine to give the high strength and strong tear resistance required.

Preferred By Consumers

Using sustainable packaging helps brands positively connect with consumers.

A 2023 survey found that consumers are adapting their purchasing behaviours to reflect shifting environmental preferences. 53% of consumers are actively taking steps to increase their use of paper packaging. 41% of consumers would even avoid retailers that are not actively trying to reduce their use of non-recyclable packaging.[8]

In another recent study, 61% of European consumers say the environmental impact of a product's packaging affects their decision-making process. Over three quarters of consumers said they would pay more for a product if it came in more sustainable packaging.[9]

Paper packaging is made from renewable materials. It is durable, attractive, recyclable and biodegradable. It is an essential component of the circular economy.

Sources

1. Two Sides analysis of FAO data, based on State of The World's Forests 2020
2. Eurostat, Recycling rate of packaging waste by type of packaging (EU27), 2021
3. European Paper Recycling Council, Monitoring Report, 2022
4. Pro Carton, Recyclability Of Cartonboard And Carton, 2021
5. United Nations Conference On Trade And Development (UNCTAD), Estimates of Global e-commerce, 2021
6. CEPI Key Statistics, 2022 (Based on the total use of paper for recycling divided by total paper and board production for Corrugated and Kraft, and Carton Board in 2022)
7. Research Institute of Sweden Bioeconomy Unit – Comparing the environmental profile of mailer bags made from Expression E-Com kraft paper to existing e-commerce mailing solutions
8. Two Sides Trend Tracker 2023, European Findings
9. Pro Carton, The Second European Consumer Packaging Perceptions Study, 2021

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