

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

PLASTIC POLLUTION IN 2021

Sustainable packaging has been a hot topic for consumers for many years, but the pandemic forced countless consumers to shift their priorities. One main concern that got bumped to the bottom of the list was the environment.

By IRI Lead Consultant Justin Nel.

In a January 2020 survey, the environment was the top concern for most Australians at 40 per cent. This made sense given we'd just been through an extensive and destructive bushfire season and the environment was top of mind and media. However, as April arrived and with it the increased spread of the Covid-19 virus and lockdown, understandably healthcare became the key concern at 55 per cent, followed by the economy at 48 per cent.

A confronting concern but easily forgotten

It's estimated that globally we produce 350 million tonnes of plastic each year. While most of this ends up in landfill, eight million tonnes end up in the ocean each year.

Plastic in the ocean is not new. Consumer concerns about it aren't new either. The first report about the great Pacific garbage patch was in 1988, when consumers learnt about a trash vortex spanning the oceans from the west coast of North America to Japan.

More recently, in 1997, a Japanese research vessel confirmed that the garbage patch had doubled in size. While shocking as a large mass of ocean plastic is, it's also easily forgotten as it doesn't affect our day-to-day lives.

How do we within the FMCG industry implement genuine change? Because any action by legislators, retailers or manufacturers will inevitably involve a cost and decrease margins. And will consumers really care enough to pay for these changes, or will they be fickle and just claim to care, but not follow through at the checkout? Will consumers expect others to pay the price for more environmentally friendly options?

Ocean pollution hits home

Ocean pollution is no longer just out there floating. We're now at the critical point where it's not a headline easily forgotten. Our pollution has come home and is in our fridges. Reports claim we could be eating the equivalent of a credit card's worth of micro plastic



each week. Key categories containing micro plastic are bottled water and, as expected, seafood. It's these concerning statistics that have literally hit home and will hopefully force a change finally to happen.

However, despite these new concerns on how pollution could be impacting them directly, it's still difficult for consumers to act on these aspirational goals. As many products don't clearly communicate the details of packaging, nor do we explain that a higher price may be due to the environmentally friendly packs. So, could this be an opportunity to change on-pack messaging, explaining the cost of the environmentally friendly packaging to the consumer?

When presented the clear options, will consumers do the right thing? Or will they criticise brands for pushing the cost onto them? Or do they understand that their actions can make a difference, and will they happily engage and support brands that are doing the right thing and reducing unnecessary plastic?

Alternatively, can we just remove all plastic? It has a bad reputation, and many think we'd be better without it. Yet is that even practical or possible? 'Plastic free' as a hashtag had almost 3.5 million Instagram posts as of 1 March 2021. But it's important to remind ourselves that plastic, when used correctly, is an incredible asset significantly reducing food waste.

Three or 14 days of cucumber life?

The use of just 1.5g of plastic film for wrapping a cucumber can extend its

shelf life from three days to 14 days. Selling grapes in plastic bags or trays has reduced in-store wastage of grapes by 20 per cent. Plastic can be seen as a necessary evil to reduce food waste.

So, what are some options to help the environment while preventing food waste?

- Researchers have created a biodegradable material from cellulose derived from tree fibres and chitin derived from crab shells. It has the potential to replace plastic and keep food fresh.
- Many manufacturers are using paper rather than plastic, as it's easily recycled and is far more biodegradable.

Where to next?

Rejection of plastic won't go away. Despite the waste reduction, plastic has a bad rap, and as it enters our food system in micro particle form, people will get more vocal about their dislike and try to avoid it whenever possible.

Consumers want to see action from brands and retailers. They expect better-for-the-planet choices to be easy to make, and the onus is on the industry to help them make these better choices.



About Justin Nel

Justin Nel is a lead consultant for IRI and brings with him extensive experience in the food and beverage industry. His focus is aligning clients'

business objectives with relevant insights and information, using IRI services to deliver unique strategic views of consumer trends and products that will deliver growth.

About IRI

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