



Leading the Charge

Independent boxmakers continue to be way out ahead on the sustainability front

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Sustainability has long been a core value at Meyers, the Minneapolis-based print services company, but few clients showed interest—especially when it came to paying for it. In recent years, however, CEO Christopher Dillon has seen a shift.

“People care more now,” he says. “From a business standpoint, it’s a good thing because we’ve been focused on sustainability for a long time. It’s helpful for humanity to finally see people willing to do something about it. We’ve got a lot of work to do, and there’s still a long way to go, but it feels like the scales are tilting in the right direction.”

Sustainability isn’t a corporate buzzword anymore. It’s a necessity as businesses polish their environmental credentials. That puts boxmaking—steeped in recycling throughout its history—in the right place at the right time, ready to step up sustainable operations while teaching customers and consumers about the environmental benefits of paper-based packaging.



Having the Talk

Indiana-based Michigan City Paper Box Co. makes rigid boxes, primarily for the jewelry industry. Most of its chipboard is made from pulped corrugated and newspaper. About half of the papers wrapping the boxes are recycled content. Glues are 100% recycled and recyclable. Even the cottony insert known as jeweler’s fiber is 100% recycled.

“We have been environmentally focused almost accidentally because of the materials our product is made from,” says Keith Thomas, director of strategic initiatives and business development. “We were kind of sustainable before sustainability was cool.”

Within the rigid box industry, Thomas has seen slow but steady progress in sustainability over the last five years, and he expects more in the next five. Increasingly, RFQs arrive that list sustainability as an important factor. Michigan City takes those requests as a cue to educate the procurement staff of those potential clients on the choices that impact sustainability. They might learn, for instance, that the circular life of a box ends if a plastic-based film lamination is applied.

Education and customer communications are essential to building shared goals around sustainability, industry players agree. One client of Dillon's, asking about lowering its toxic emissions, concurred with Meyers' recommendation for eliminating the alcohol used on an older press. Similar dialogues are becoming common as companies scour their supply chains for ways to boost their sustainability figures and meet the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals presented to investors, customers, and other stakeholders.

"We're pretty well positioned to offer suggestions to help customers with their sustainability goals," Dillon says. The pandemic's supply chain crisis has made those conversations even easier, he adds, as customers forced to seek alternatives to their mainstays have been open to discussing the switch to more sustainable materials.

The capabilities for sustainability are baked into the Meyers organization over decades but also, as sustainability demands ramp up, acquired through strategic hires, says Dillon. That includes a sustainability-minded senior vice president of sales and business development and a newly hired environmental health, safety, and sustainability leader.

Boxmakers, designers, and suppliers can find fact-based, data-driven support for their in-house sustainability decisions and customer conversations in American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) materials, including *Design Guidance for Recyclability of Paper-Based Packaging*, the 2021 report delving into the impact of nonfiber elements, and the 2021 *Access to Recycling Study*, which found that 79% of Americans have access to residential curbside recycling programs.

"There is a strong business case to be made for sustainable manufacturing and for paper-based products," says AF&PA Senior Director of Energy and Environmental Policy Jesse Levine. "First and foremost, individuals are increasingly aware of the environmental impact of product packaging, and they view paper and cardboard as a highly sustainable option. And they're willing to pay more for renewable and biodegradable packaging. Since our products are easily recycled, people can contribute to the circular economy."

Empowering Industry Messaging

At the Paper and Packaging Board (P+PB), the board of directors made a timely decision in late 2019. Seeing consumers eager to opt out of plastics, they recast P+PB's promotional efforts into consumer education about the recyclability of paper-based packaging, the vast U.S. reforestation that industry supports, and ways to recycle boxes.

In the years after the "How Life Unfolds" campaign launched in July 2015, more of those boxes were arriving in American homes, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the e-commerce surge.

Today's campaign includes social media postings and everything from colorful, animated broadcast ads to the YouTube series *Baking With Josh & Ange*, featuring Angela Snyder of *The Office* (much more fun than her dour TV character) and her husband, Josh Snyder. Simple, common-sense tips from a habits expert—put a box for collecting paper-based items on each floor of the house—trigger consumers to take that last step on the way to the recycling bin.

The campaign stokes the goodwill and civic-mindedness that, research shows, consumers feel when they recycle. "We make a case for being a 'force for nature,'" says P+PB President Mary Anne Hansan. "That's our call to action. When you choose paper-based products, you're making the best choice for the planet."

Now, the P+PB's "Box to Nature" program offers a recycling mark for printing on boxes—preferably a top flap, for visibility—featuring three key elements. A message promoting the circularity of paper-based packaging says, "This box has 7+ lives. Our planet has one." Simple instructions say, "Empty. Flatten. Recycle." And a QR code links to an interactive microsite on recycling. P+PB research found that 75% of consumers agree they would be more likely to recycle after seeing the message.

Together, How Life Unfolds and Box to Nature empower the industry to get involved on multiple fronts, Hansan says. A data- and research-based sales enablement program offers materials and training on the recyclability and planet-saving benefits of paper-based products. P+PB offers its materials free to the industry, with robust support through a \$24 million multimedia consumer-awareness campaign. "When consumers know that the box becomes something else and it's used over and over, they feel good about their choice to use paper and paper-based packaging, and frankly they start looking for it," said Hansan.



Industry public education campaigns have been a key factor in increasing participation in recycling programs, says AF&PA Executive Director of Recovered Fiber Brian Hawkinson. AF&PA's campaigns are boosted by wide availability of recycling programs and significant industry investment in collection programs and product circularity. "Industry innovations and infrastructure investments continue to this day," Hawkinson says. "The paper industry has planned or announced approximately \$5 billion in manufacturing infrastructure investments from 2019 to 2023 to continue to make the best use of recycled fiber in our products."

Boxmakers can't solve the problem of educating consumers about recyclability, but they can help, says Dillon. Going where audiences get their information has led Meyers to post educational items on LinkedIn for the business exposure, and to make TikTok videos on sustainability. "The younger generation is committed to sustainability in a way we haven't seen with previous generations, and they're also willing to pay more," he says. "There's data out there that says that."

Making Gains in Nonfiber Materials

In the full spectrum of supplies, paper is “the easier answer” to achieving a sustainable product, admits Dillon. The inks, adhesives, and coatings that make each box functional and distinctive are another matter, but he sees room for “a lot of small wins.” In his shop, there is the elimination of alcohol use from the last of the lithographic presses, and a barrel collecting used ink for black printing that’s not “super color-critical.” Quality can never be sacrificed, he adds, but options in products and processes are making advances. For instance, Meyers is now evaluating and seeing opportunity in processless plates. “Technology is getting to the point where we’re comfortable that it’s good enough to sustain the quality our customers require,” Dillon says.

AF&PA’s 2021 *Design Guidance for Recyclability of Paper-Based Packaging* put a spotlight on the innovations and technology improvements that are making nonfiber elements and treatments “easier to recycle than historically,” says Hawkinson.

“One of the biggest takeaways was that every combination of paper-based packaging with nonfiber elements attached to it is recyclable,” he adds. While challenges remain, the guide “helps companies make strategic decisions to achieve their sustainability goals.”

Michigan City typically uses soy-based inks and an environmentally friendly adhesive based, in part, in waste gelatin collected from gel cap makers. Whenever possible, the company tries to steer customers toward such options as aqueous coatings and sustainable inks. However, “balancing sustainability with aesthetics sometimes involves a bit of a trade-off,” including in the finishing processes on papers, says Thomas.

That’s when sustainable options play a role. Consider that digital printing instead of foil stamping improves recyclability. Michigan City’s natural black flat kraft box is 100% recycled, with a finish similar to nonrecyclable film laminates. In an age when online shoppers don’t need to be swayed by eye-catching packaging, such an option can be viable, says Thomas. “We’re still able to put a sustainable gloss logo on a dull recycled paper that comes close to looking like the nonrecyclable film laminated box,” he says. “We get pretty close a lot of times.”

At P+PB, a summer 2021 design challenge invited competitors to create packaging that is 100% recyclable in all its elements and from start to finish—from product box to shipping. “We are trying to get this message out that it’s even better when it’s designed from the beginning to be recyclable,” says Hansan.



Operational Sustainability

Leaders in sustainability don’t limit their eco-focused efforts to sourcing. They also infuse sustainable practices throughout their operations. As AF&PA notes, paper mills have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by more than 24% since 2005, by using more renewable bioenergy and switching to less carbon-intensive fuels.

Michigan City chose to source most of its paper from a mill electrified by hydropower, in part because “it complements our focus on sustainability,” says Thomas. At his facility, automation improves efficiency, and recyclable waste is collected and bailed for return to the product component stream. “It may go back into making the very chipboard or the very paper that we end up using ultimately,” he says.

Meyers has embraced an enterprisewide sustainability strategy. A rooftop solar array and a partnership with Xcel Energy to purchase electricity from wind and solar sources helped the company achieve its goal of carbon-free manufacturing in 2021.

The solar project and installation of LED lighting in the facility were initiated in compliance with Meyers’ certification from the Sustainable Green Printing (SGP) Partnership, Dillon says. The process felt familiar due to its similarity to ISO certification, and Meyers was an early adopter. Annual audits and continuous improvement projects ensure that certification principles are infused into daily operations. A company sustainability committee tracks progress. “It all starts with corporate social responsibility and it being the right thing to do,” Dillon says. “I like the accountability that comes with the SGP.”

SGP certification also positions the company to attract new customers from the growing number of businesses seeking partners with sustainability credentials. Some of those customers—educated by Meyers about the opportunity—are now trying to make a dent in their sustainability goals by encouraging their other suppliers to seek certification.

Collaborating with industry organizations gives different segments of the industry opportunities to reinforce their particular messaging while presenting a unified voice about the imperative of sustainability, says Hansan. "We're all motivated by a very singular purpose, which is to create strong and healthy markets for our products, because we know that's a really important part of keeping forests as forests," she says. "We're making sure that consumers understand that recycling is valuable, and they're making an important difference. It's like a symphony where we all have really important parts in the orchestra, but the thing that drives all of us is creating a favorable market for paper products."

A Pathway to the Future

In an industry in which sustainability is ingrained, leaders still see room to grow, but they also see progress. Dillon, for instance, is encouraged by the converter and materials sides "taking it more seriously than I've ever seen."

AF&PA has largely met its 2020 sustainability goals. Now, its sights are set on Better Practices, Better Planet 2030. The goals strive toward further reducing greenhouse gas emissions, advancing a circular value chain, driving water stewardship, and advancing more resilient U.S. forests.

AF&PA's advocacy and education for lawmakers, policymakers, and local communities are also "at the heart of what we do," says Levine. Signing up for AF&PA's grassroots text alerts (text "Paper" to 50457) and the *AF&PA Delivered* biweekly newsletter keeps industry players in the know. "All of us can be a voice for our industry," he says.

P+PB's engaging, youthful, and colorful campaigns overlay education with branding that gets the attention of entertainment-hungry media consumers. That approach is also generating supply chain enthusiasm among packagers and the rest of the paper-based products industry, says Hansan. "It's so topical," she says. "Before, sustainability used to be a small part of features and attributes. Now, I've heard more and more companies saying that it's all of those things. We have to be the whole package, and consumers don't always know that whole sustainability story, especially on the forest side. We are addressing all of those topics through our advertising."

After all, paper-based packaging has long had a good story to tell about sustainability. Thomas' Michigan City Paper Box has taken a leadership role under CEO Al Hoodwin, former AICC chairman, who continues to advocate for sustainability industrywide. "As the trend continues, it will put us in a more favorable position, because it's just the nature of who we are," Thomas says. "It's how we've operated for years and years. There's not much that falls in our lap, but this is a strange twist of fate that's working in our favor."



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