

Sustainable Packaging: Does it Really Exist?

Gordon L Robertson

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The sociological term ‘tipping point’ refers to the level at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable. It is claimed that ideas, products, messages and behaviours spread in the same way as viruses, and for the packaging industry, sustainable packaging has reached its tipping point. It is now impossible to pick up any packaging magazine or attend any packaging conference without the topic featuring prominently. But what does it really mean and will it offer industry the silver bullet that proponents claim?

A search on the web reveals many definitions of sustainability and sustainable development (SD). It is therefore no surprise that the community at large as well as many in the packaging industry find the terms confusing, raising the question of whether there is a correct definition. However, unless there is a general consensus around the meaning of these terms, there will continue to be confusion and the possibility that some companies will make unsubstantiated and/or erroneous claims about the sustainability of their products or processes or packaging and mislead consumers.

The most widely-accepted definition of SD is the one that appeared in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the Brundtland Commission) in 1987 entitled Our Common Future:

“Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

In other words, sustainable development is the level of human consumption and activity which can continue into the foreseeable future, so that the systems which provide goods and services to humans persist indefinitely. This definition recognises that SD is a balance of three dimensions: environmental protection, social development and economic growth. However, as the Brundtland Report pointed out, “....**Sustainable development is not a new name for environmental protection: it is a new concept of economic growth**”. To date almost all efforts on sustainable packaging have focused on reducing environmental impacts with little attention on the social dimension or discussion of sustainable consumption.

The US-based Sustainable Packaging Coalition (SPC) defines sustainable packaging as:

- packaging that is beneficial, safe and healthy for individuals and communities throughout its life cycle;
- meets market criteria for performance and cost;
- is sourced, manufactured, transported, and recycled using renewable energy;
- optimises the use of renewable or recycled source materials;
- is manufactured using clean production technologies and best practices;
- is made from materials healthy in all probable end-of-life scenarios;
- is physically designed to optimise materials and energy; and
- is effectively recovered and utilised in biological and/or industrial closed loop cycles.

A critical review of this definition has recently been published (Robertson 2009). It is important to note that no packages on the market are sustainable according to this definition. European (2009) prefers to talk about packaging and sustainability rather than sustainable packaging which is probably a more helpful approach.

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The lack of a common definition has made engaging in meaningful discussions on sustainability challenging. In practice, the term 'sustainability' is used by companies to describe a range of activities: energy and water conservation programs, carbon footprints, human rights and worker safety initiatives, and even food donations and charitable events that benefit the general community.

Young (2007) found a great deal of confusion regarding terms and claims, including the concept of sustainable packaging itself, which was not clearly distinguished from 'recycled' in most shoppers' minds. The report noted that it is very difficult to get accurate consumer feedback about sustainable packaging unless you have actual packages or concepts to share. It was suggested that to avoid getting misleading feedback, be wary of asking about attitudes on a general level and focus more on behaviour in specific shopping and usage situations.

It is clear that consumers (not to mention most manufacturers and retailers) have no idea what sustainable packaging is. Therefore asking consumers their views on a subject which they do not understand is unlikely to provide helpful responses. However, this has not deterred market research companies from producing reports on sustainable packaging.

Last year I received a flyer inviting me to purchase for almost \$3000 a report on 'Trends in Ethical and Sustainable Packaging'. The flyer helpfully informed me that 'ethical and sustainable packaging is an umbrella term which covers a number of different types of packaging, including recycled, biodegradable and reduced/lightweight packaging'. Ethical packaging is constantly evolving, the flyer assured me, 'as companies begin to find ethical sustainability is more of a threat towards their corporate social responsibility. Packaging a product in a material which is recyclable is the most common form of ethical packaging and packaging that has been made from recycled materials is also a form of ethical packaging. Biodegradable packaging is an ethical packaging concept which is becoming more popular due to the shortage of landfill sites around the world. Lightweight or reduced packaging is an ethical packaging innovation which a number of companies have started to use to make their packaging more ethical'.

The fact that the packaging industry has been light-weighting its materials for over 50 years seems to have passed these writers by, as does the fact that the majority of packaging materials are recyclable. Thanks to this report, industry now knows that as well as moving towards sustainable packaging, it also has to ensure that it is ethical. While it is amazing that people can write such rubbish and, it seems, be taken seriously, even more amazing is that companies are prepared to buy and read it. Also amazing is the way the word sustainable has been twisted and applied by companies to activities that clearly cannot be maintained indefinitely for economic, environmental and/or social reasons. The media has abstained from any critical examination of these outrageous claims, preferring instead to ride the sustainability bandwagon as far and as fast as possible, in a similar way to the global warming issue.

Earlier this year I received another flyer inviting me to purchase for almost \$4000 a report on 'Sustainable Packaging Trends: Consumer Perspectives and Product Opportunities'. The flyer stated that 'many consumers would like to simplify their lives and de-clutter them both emotionally and physically. Packaging which is more sustainable, due to being less excessive and less draining on resources, can be a part of this important de-cluttering process. In that sense, it becomes lifestyle supporting'.

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The report also noted that ‘ethics and ecological concerns drive the move towards sustainable packaging. Ethicality [a word I’ve never come across before] and sustainability are associated with a sense of wellbeing’. The report advised companies to ‘incorporate more reusability and returnability into packaging’ with the authors being seemingly unaware that many life cycle assessments (LCAs) have shown one-way packaging to have lower environmental impacts than returnable and reusable.

Recently the Sage Group (Raymond 2009) conducted a web-based research study called ‘My Views on Environmentally Friendly Packaging’. The survey did not refer to ‘sustainable packaging’ because, the authors claim, 89 percent of consumers do not know what it means: to consumers, sustainable packaging is recyclable packaging.

Readers who, like the author, have spent their working life associated with packaging will find the present discussion on sustainability quite familiar. Light-weighting, recycling and biodegradation have all been around for many years and will still feature prominently long after the current debate on sustainable (and ethical) packaging has been overtaken by another trend.

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