
Re-packaging the packaging debate

How can we take an ethical approach to protecting, storing & transporting food?

Report of Business Forum, 5th March 2019

Packaging is a systemic issue

Many of today's packaging systems were designed for yesterday's food systems. The market has evolved away from greengrocers and local supplies of fresh produce to a more centralised model. The system has been built around consumerist notions of convenience and price, which has contributed to shift to a heavily pre-packaged culture. For some longstanding businesses, this has been reflected in the evolution of their packaging too, for example moving from refillable barrels decades ago to aluminium cans now.

Those working to try and solve packaging issues generally agree that that packaging is a systems debate – not something to be addressed in silos.

“Waste is a failure of design and we can design things better.”

What is clear is that to tackle the packaging issue, it is vital to change mindsets, not just to change packaging. For instance, are there ways to shorten supply chains so that packaging, which is often there to increase shelf-life, becomes obsolete? And where packaging is inevitable, how can products be delivered to the general public and back again in a systemic way where packaging can be reused?

Shifting narratives

Following the 'Blue Planet moment', packaging and plastics have catapulted to the forefront of public debate. On the bright side, it opens up opportunities for alternative solutions, as it is no longer 'weird' to bring your own coffee cup or refillable packaging to your local coffee shop. However, the narrative has been overpowered by the issue of plastics, which could lead us to other options that are unsustainable in different ways. It is also giving rise to lots of claims about zero waste, some of which are questionable.

Crucially, what Blue Planet shows is that we, as a sector, and more broadly as society, cannot carry on as we are. The series made society face how people are treating the planet and the need for change. This clearly resonated with the public, as it is a simple concept to grasp in the face of what can often be complex or distant issues. It is a fantastic chance to engage the public and gain their much-needed support for markets to shift towards more sustainable systems.

What it also highlights is the need to celebrate the positive change already happening. More businesses are revisiting their supply chains to reduce the need for packaging and to look at reusability guidelines. Milkmen and milkwomen are making a comeback in some parts of the UK. This shows that there are glimmers of a new system emerging that works and could pave the way to better system infrastructure. Further down the waste hierarchy, plastic milk bottles have a high recyclability, while nearly all aluminium cans are recycled.

Time for a reuse revolution?

A few years ago, not everyone was ready for a zero-waste concept, hence trying to establish a brand centred on encouraging reuse of packaging was a challenge. In the current environment, post the 'Blue planet moment', there are likely to be many more people open to a reuse model. Much as it is becoming the norm for people to reuse plastic carrier bags, it is easy to imagine growing numbers of people with reusable containers for food and drink in the future.

The power of business

Those in business have incredible power to choose what is placed on the market. They also shape the narrative as to what is important in the food system. Is it price and convenience? Is it quality and ethics? Is it community and purpose? And with power comes responsibility, as for any other player in the food system (be it government, NGOs, or the public).

Businesses must take packaging-related issues seriously, but must avoid a knee-jerk reaction to the Blue Planet moment. It must not distract from arguably (even) bigger issues at hand, not least climate change.

Via procurement, businesses have huge opportunities to support social enterprises and progressive businesses in their supply chains. Procurement teams should have criteria in their contracts about sustainability, not just about lowest cost.

Investing in relationships

A key ingredient for change is strong relationships, be it with suppliers, partner organisations, customers or other. Trust and honesty are key to building strong relationships. No one has all the answers, and it is OK to say that out loud.

It is legitimate to take time to reflect rather than jumping into saying what businesses think the public wants to hear. Businesses are not alone. Climate Change will be tackled with the combined efforts of everyone.

Empowering the public

What would make it easier for the public to help businesses tackle these issues? It is not simply about packaging, but about wider interactions with the general public. Across the globe, there is a rise of purpose-led businesses, and more widely of a purpose-driven society.

How do people dispose of packaging? What mechanisms would help them reuse material or recycle better? When customers throw away packaging, this is the last interaction they have with a product or brand and often do not know what to do with it. How can business simplify materials and make it easy for the general public to dispose of it in a way that functions within the system?

The public can only make intuitive choices based on limited information (as it is unrealistic to expect them to understand all the systemic forces at play).

“As businesses, we need to have courage and take responsibility”

Plastics is easier for the public to visualise than a major long-term issue like climate change. That said, it is important to be mindful of what publics want. While many may assume it would be a good thing to move to glass packaging, such a shift might in practice cause far more environmental damage.

Therefore, while informing and giving direction to the public is important, it is businesses who can drive positive change across supply chains. So much can be done across value chains that the general public may not even be aware of. While everyone has responsibility, putting all the onus on customer choice is unrealistic. There is no such thing as sustainable packaging – only sustainable packaging systems.

Helping government

While central government can feel hard for businesses to reach, it was suggested that local authorities can be more open to collaboration and more flexible and often welcome industry support. The government is not set up to understand the food system in the way that businesses working in the sector are, so they look to them for guidance too. This can take the shape of collaboration with Local Authorities, where there often is capacity locally to recycle, but where the public remains confused as to what is recyclable or not.

Businesses also have a golden opportunity to shape future policy with the current Government consultations on packaging (which close on 13th May

2019). These include questions on Deposit-Return Schemes (DRS), packaging waste regimes, a plastic tax, and consistency in recycling collections. It is important that food businesses respond to all four of the current Government consultations on packaging in the round and put views forward.

Packaging is more than just plastics

There was broad consensus on the need for reasonable solutions and measured approaches in relation to packaging (e.g. removal of single-use plastics). However, it was suggested that a crusade against plastics of all kind may be unhelpful and may have unintended consequences (e.g. leading to greater food waste). There should be a greater focus on avoiding the need for packaging in the first place. There should be more emphasis on reuse (sometimes with plastic), rather than just on recycling. It was suggested that *compostable* packaging is likely to be better for the environment than *biodegradable*. Concern was also expressed about the impacts of biopackaging, unless it was derived from agricultural waste products. It was argued that it was problematic to grow crops for packaging materials while land is at a premium and while some people do not have enough to eat.

What businesses need... ...from governments

The general confusion on recycling stems from inconsistencies in the UK waste collection system. Conversations have been ongoing for years with little progress, but there is a clear need from industry for standardised roadside recycling and waste collection across the country.

“Whatever it will cost, we will pay. What we want is a nation-wide [recycling] infrastructure that works.”

Beyond recycling materials, there is a strong need for guidelines on responsible use of reusable materials (e.g. Safety Standard for Reusable), which would give businesses the confidence to reuse materials more. What can be learned from the milk bottle collection system?

The EU Ecodesign Directive for energy using products¹ sets minimum standards that need to be met before a product is put on the market. Could something similar be applied to food and drink packaging?

Ultimately, businesses would benefit from government defining the rules of the game in which businesses compete, with stronger ethical and sustainable criteria.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009L0125>

...from other players in the food system

The packaging world is still stuck in old paradigms (e.g. cucumber wrapped in plastic will last 5 more days, rather than “let’s grow mini cucumbers, which are tastier, less likely to be wasted and therefore don’t require a plastic outer wrapping”). Plastic use can not continue in the way it has. However, the UK has a strong packaging industry that could shift designs and help the transition from a ‘single use’ (throwaway) society to a society with reuse at its heart.

There is also a lack of access to accurate information, which is particularly detrimental to smaller businesses who are then can only rely on the information provided by sales representatives.

More broadly, a centralised model means many smaller scale systems (e.g. doorstep delivery of milk) disappeared, albeit some of those are re-emerging. How can the system be broken down into smaller, more resilient and autonomous parts?

And finally, the media (and more generally the collective voice of the sector) needs to be clear and honest about the complexity of the issue.

Concluding comments

- Packaging is the tip of the iceberg (of resource use) and is a symptom of more fundamental issues.
- Tackling packaging should start with how to reduce the need for packaging in the first place, not just which packaging is less damaging to the planet.
- That prompts bigger questions of retail models and how to get food and drink to people safely and with low environmental impacts
- Food businesses should respond to all four of the current Government consultations on packaging in the round and put views forward. It is a golden opportunity to shape future policy and to push for things that almost everyone wants e.g. consistent recycling collection scheme.
- It is important to use the Blue Planet plastics moment, but not let it distract from arguably bigger issues at hand, like climate change.
- There are tensions between the merits of an agile approach by government (test, learn and improve) versus big bold change, i.e. a once-in-a-generation opportunity for major infrastructure change.
- ‘Consumers’ have been told they should care about price and convenience. Collectively we should tell a different story - perhaps that of food citizenship?

What next?

Key questions to consider, and to act on, include:

- **How can we innovate not only in packaging technology but also in business models?**
- **How can we test new ideas, and then scale them up?**
- **What would prioritising *reuse* (over recycling) look like for your business?**
- **What *non-packaging* solutions are there to the problems you are currently using packaging to try and solve in your business?**
- **How do we feel as a business about levers for change that encourage more careful – often less - consumption?**
- **Respond to all four consultations and consider how they interrelate!**
- **Everyone has a role to play, an opportunity to shift the system, and a responsibility to fellow players in the system to do what they can. What is yours?**

Further resources

1. **The European Commission’s Circular Economy Action Plan** [\[link\]](#)
2. **Defra Consultation:**
 - [Consistency in Household and Business Recycling Collections in England](#)
 - [Consultation to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme \(DRS\) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#)
 - [Consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system](#)
 - [Plastic Packaging Tax](#)
 - [Plastic Packaging Tax \(high-level consultation\)](#)
 - [Resource and Waste and Plastic Packaging Tax Consultations](#)
3. **Other relevant Business Forum reports:**
‘In good food we trust: How can we build trust in the food system in a rapidly changing world?’, Report of Business Forum, 27th November 2018

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 5th March 2019. We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Guy Singh-Watson**, farmer and founder of Riverford, and **Catherine Conway**, Founder & Director of Unpackaged Innovation Ltd. **Cathryn Higgs**, Head of food policy at Co-operative Food and member of the Food Ethics Council, chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley dan@foodethicscouncil.org +44 (0) 333 012 4147.