



# Sustainable packaging is here to stay

by Lynette Louw

While dressing up your product in attractive packaging would seem like the perfect answer to all your marketing woes, presentation is not the be-all and end-all of packaging. Many aspects are to be taken into account when deciding on the perfect package for your product. One consideration which stands out above the rest and has been leading the way over the past few years, is that of sustainability.

"Sustainability" has become the packaging industry's concept of choice, and role players in the dairy and many other industries are scurrying to adhere to its principles and guidelines. Many already have their ducks in a row and are meeting the demands of its customers and their customers – the consumer.

But what exactly does sustainability entail and how should the smaller processor become part of this new drive?

## The meaning of the term

The Brundtland Commission first defined sustainability in 1987 as "development that meets the needs of today, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". Sustainability, as a concept, embraces issues such as recycling and energy conservation, lower emissions, energy efficiency, water conservation, fuel efficiency, package recycling, waste management, economic assistance in developing nations, and efficient transportation of goods.

Which brings us to the next question: How on earth are all these issues addressed in the packaging industry? The first important step is meeting consumer demand. According to a study conducted among consumers in the USA in 2007, consumers will purchase a product if the following (in order of importance) are in place:

- The product itself is organic.
- The packaging is environmentally friendly.
- The product itself is better for the environment.
- The manufacturer treats its employees and suppliers fairly.

## Companies that walk the talk

To meet these and other consumer demands, large processors and packaging companies have joined the sustainability drive, and many have put programmes in place to ensure that their products meet the stringent demands of the modern (and very aware) consumer.

Kraft Foods, a major manufacturer of foodstuffs, which produces well-known brands such as Philadelphia Cheese, Kraft Natural Cheese and Miracle Whip, focuses on six areas that impact on the environment. These are agricultural commodities, packaging, energy, water, waste, and transportation and distribution.

By 2007, Kraft Foods had succeeded in achieving a 90% recycling rate at its manufacturing facilities, while also reducing its water and energy consumption, and

reducing its carbon dioxide emissions by 30%. The company has also partnered with TerraCycle, which takes packages that are difficult to recycle, and converts them into handbags, umbrellas and other novelty items.

Well-known US-based organic yoghurt-maker, Stonyfield Farm, was one of the first American companies to go carbon neutral in the 1990s. Between 1995 and 2005, the company was able to reduce its facility energy use and associated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by one third. Stonyfield Farm is also accredited with creating the first practical “how-to” guide, showing other companies how to offset emissions.

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London-based manufacturing giant, Unilever, uses a so-called “business partner code” to ensure that its suppliers meet expectations relating to environmental and social impacts. Between 1991 and 2006, dairy giant, Nestlé, saved \$510 million dollars through a combination of packaging source reduction, re-use, recycling, and energy conservation. Nestlé is also one of the first food companies to have joined the “global reporting initiative multi-stakeholder programme” to develop reporting standards and indicators on sustainability in the food industry.

Danone Group has a carbon and water footprint tool in place. It has reduced water consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions throughout its chain, and collects and recycles packaging in more than 20 countries. Reducing the weight of its packaging is another target, which was achieved by

reducing the weight of its 1,5 litre bottles by 35%. It aims to eventually allow bottles to be produced with 25% recycled PET, a plastic which has drastically gained ground over the past 40 year.

### What is PET?

PET is the abbreviation for the term “polyethylene terephthalate”, which is a plastic resin and a form of polyester. PET is a type of plastic manufactured from oil-based raw materials and is labelled with the #1 code at or near the bottom of the bottle or container. The first PET-bottle was patented in 1973 and recycled in 1977. Every since, its popularity has grown and new uses have developed every year.

PET is a popular package for food and non-food products, and is used mostly to package soft drinks, water, juice, peanut butter, oil, cosmetics and household cleaners. It is noted for the fact that it is lightweight, inexpensive, resealable, shatter-resistant and 100% recyclable. According to Petco, or PET Plastic Recycling South Africa, PET is the material of choice for many bottlers, with new uses developed every year.

Gauteng generates the most PET post-consumer products, at 55% of the total, followed by the Western Cape on 13%. KwaZulu-Natal accounts for 10% of PET waste, while the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga account of 5% each. Northwest and the Free State generate 4% each, while Limpopo and the Northern Cape create the smallest amount, at 3% and 1% respectively.

### Trends for dairy packaging

Plastic is set to dominate the demand for packaging for some time to come. While bottles remain the favourite, the humble pouch has certainly made a comeback lately, and is tipped to more than double its share of the US beverage packaging market over the next decade. Pouch containers are expected to show the greatest percentage growth of all packaging formats for drinks over the next ten years.

According to the USA's Packaging Machinery Manufacturer's Institute, PMMI, pouches use far less landfill space than normal plastic, and are often 100% biodegradable. At a more practical level, pouches are very space efficient and offer significant savings in transport and storage.

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Manufacturers such as Astrapak claim that their sachet films, besides being cost-effective, use 75% less plastic than plastic bottles and promises minimal landfill impact, thus meeting some of the stringent demands of sustainability.

### Aseptic packaging

Tetra Pak is contributing its share to the environment, by producing so-called “aseptic” packaging. Aseptic refers to ambient products (which remain stable on the shelf at room temperature), while non-aseptic refers to pasteurised products that require chilled distribution.

Energy is saved when aseptically packaged products are transported, as they don't require chilling. The manufacturer

also claims that the packages are extremely lightweight and save space, as they stack together like building blocks, saving further energy while reducing emissions.

### Other trends

Brand building is a major factor when choosing your packaging. Therefore attention grabbing shapes and features such as closures, labels and caps, are some of the things one looks at before packaging your milk or cheese. Nampak Liquid, for example, has introduced so-called “multi-layer” bottles for UHT-milk to the South African market. These bottles were also named “Innovation of the Year” within Nampak Group. The product adorns the shelves of Woolworths and Homsek Dairy.

The recent economic downturn has, however, seen many a company cutting costs and ultimately opting for going green and increasing sales, rather than spending money on cool designs and differentiating formats.

Sustainability has literally become a mainstream commitment. Sustainable packaging, in whichever form, is becoming a fact of life and is expected to become a normal requirement for doing business. And while this is certainly the way to go, the packaging industry still has some homework and education to do in order to properly explain the value and importance of sustainable packaging, to its clients. Consumer pressure could ultimately speed up this process. **M&J**