



13.04.2021: WPO-Präsident Pienaar: Definitely the world has been changing

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WPO-Präsident Pierre Pienaar thematisiert im neusten WPO-Newsletter die weltweiten Entwicklungen in der Verpackungswirtschaft seit Ausbruch der Corona-Pandemie.

The packaging industry continues to be under the spotlight and I foresee this continuing through Covid-19. It is up to us to rise to the challenge. After 13 months of Covid-19, we have raised the bar in packaging to meet the demands that pandemic has placed at us. I passionately believe that the global packaging industry will continue to do so. More so than ever before, WPO member countries have worked together to ensure a global approach has been taken to effectively meet the needs of this demand.

Packaging for the food market continues to witness significant growth in the home delivery sector as families go into lockdown or prefer to self-isolate. This new life choice has seen a rise in the production of insulated packaging to keep frozen goods safe for home deliveries. As restaurants have re-opened with limited numbers allowed, if at all, the need for take away containers has skyrocketed. Some countries have reflected an increase in demand of more than 200% for some lines of meat, seafood, and poultry. This is because of more people staying home and cooking for themselves rather than going out to eat. This change has led to a greater demand for appropriate meat trays that have been produced in safe, COVID-free environments.

There has been an overwhelming fear of consumers of being exposed to and catching COVID-19, which is currently a driving force behind safe packaging. The response to this has been that companies and brands have had to adapt to meet consumer's new demands. Not only are consumers washing their hands more frequently and using more sanitiser than they have ever used before; they are also increasing their use of household disinfectants and cleaners. Purchasing behaviour for many consumers has changed in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and consumers are now stock-piling non-perishable items such as rice, pasta, canned fish, canned vegetables etc.

Before COVID-19, companies were progressing quickly toward their sustainability goals. However, the coronavirus pandemic has negatively affected a multitude of industries around the world, especially the packaging industry. Packaging companies were coming up with innovative technologies that were friendly to the environment, reusable, and biodegradable. But, concerns about the hygiene and safety of reusable packaging temporarily halted the packaging industry's progress towards a sustainable and circular supply chain.

Following the pandemic, packaging companies will need to rebalance sustainability goals that incorporate heightened hygiene, normalise e-commerce, and take product cost into consideration. The impact of the pandemic will have a positive effect on performance because these new trends will highlight customers' needs across the industry. (<https://www.plugandplaytechcenter.com/resources/covid-19-impact-packaging-industry/>)

The challenge for us in the packaging industry, therefore, remains two-fold: our first focus should always be on aiming to produce safe, reliable, reusable or recyclable, sustainable packaging. Our second, but equally important focus, must be on insisting local governments cooperate with us as material manufacturers, or converters to create a robust, successful recycling infrastructure that can process all the fantastically exciting new innovations in sustainable packaging.

There remains confusion among consumers regarding the disposal of packaging, especially plastics; and those who are keen to clean up our planet often have nowhere to go to manage their waste packaging. As consumers expect more protective packaging than ever before, we need to become serious about finding solutions to this even greater pandemic impact on packaging.

The battle for reducing plastic waste has been a hot initiative. Countries around the world started banning single-use plastics, including Colombia, parts of the United States, China, Zimbabwe, Albania, Cameroon, Romania, and many other countries. Companies were announcing targets that they planned to meet by a certain year in the effort to become as sustainable as possible.

Unfortunately, when COVID-19 began, consumers became concerned that a person could get the virus by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or another person. The virus seems to be able to survive on cardboard for about 24 hours, and on plastic for up to three days. Even though the exact danger was unknown, sustainability programs decreased or paused in the early months of the pandemic. Several countries and US states have paused and lifted bans on single-use plastics and have even banned reusable bags temporarily.

Supermarkets saw an increase in single-use plastics for wrapping products. This was the immediate safety response that places initiated for the health and safety of people across the globe. The amount of plastic waste generated in Thailand has surged by 15% with COVID-19, despite the country's ban on plastic bags that was introduced in January 2020.

The United Kingdom was on its way to legislate banning the sale of plastic drinking straws, plastic-stemmed cotton buds, and plastic stirrers. UK Environment Minister confirmed that this will be delayed, since discarding single-use plastic products that may carry virus droplets is safer. Originally, the regulations were laid in March and set to come into force in April. In the USA, some states been calling for delays on plastic bans, fearing that reusable bags carry the virus. This pushback increased demand for products like bottled water and disposable sanitisers.

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Education in packaging knowledge is key to our future success. Attending webinars or offering and training programs to ensure they keep up with the latest trends and expectations, is an excellent start. The WPO can help you with such training courses.

I believe, post this pandemic, that public perception of packaging, particularly plastic and sustainability issues, will have altered as they realise the value of packaging. I really hope the ongoing drive to remove plastic altogether and of seeing plastic as the ogre - rather than the solution - will have changed to a push for improved waste management infrastructure around the world. COVID-19 has perhaps done the poor plastic victim a BIG favour. And, hopefully, a new focus and knowledge will lead to new innovations for better collection, for recycling and reuse of plastic materials.

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