



Why Packaging

The Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment

Introduction

Without packaging, much food and many goods would be damaged or spoiled before they got to us. In less developed countries without the sophisticated distribution and packaging systems that we have in the UK, as much as 50% of food never reaches consumers.

Some goods (such as fruit and vegetables) do not need any protection for shoppers to carry them home – but none could be transported from producer to shop without packaging.

A delicate balance has to be struck between providing adequate protection for the products inside and keeping packaging to a minimum. Industry has an interest in using only the right amount of packaging because this reduces costs, complies with the packaging laws and protects the environment.

Packaging typically protects food and goods which contain more than ten times the energy and resources that went into the packaging, so it does more than make modern lifestyles possible – it saves food and prevents products going to waste.

There's more to packaging than meets the eye

There are different types of packaging for the various stages involved in getting food from the farm onto your plate or household goods such as TVs from the factory into your living room. We all know about the packaging we take home – this is called primary or sales packaging. There are also the boxes, trays and film wrap that group the items together – these make up secondary packaging. Larger containers and pallets are used to allow the grouped items to be loaded onto lorries – these are referred to as transport packaging.

The packaging for all three stages is chosen in combination to provide the right level of protection to keep damage and wastage to a minimum. When designing packaging, it is important to consider the whole chain from start to finish because a reduction in packaging at one of the links in the chain can often lead to an increase in the packaging required in another.

Packaging is constantly being developed and updated to meet consumers' needs. The growth in single-person households means demand for smaller portions has grown. Demand for food that is easier and quicker to prepare and cook, has also risen. Convenience culture means that half of us now claim to eat 'on-the-go' with no prior thought given as to where our next meal is coming from. Factors like these pose challenges for the packaging industry which has responded, for example, by introducing new materials, novel combinations of materials, modified atmosphere packs that keep food fresher longer and oven and microwave ready packs.

The industry has also driven innovations such as non-detachable ring-pulls on cans (so that if the can is carelessly disposed of, there is one, rather than two pieces of litter) and readily open-able / re-sealable cartons.

As well as protecting and preserving goods and extending product shelf-life, packaging carries vital information on ingredients, keeps hazardous products away from children, and ensures goods are safe (where packaging cannot be opened without showing evidence of tampering). It also helps prevent small valuable items being shop-lifted.

There's less to packaging than you probably think

Over the years the packaging industry has reduced the amount of material it uses – glass containers are on average 30% lighter than in 1980, the weight of cans has fallen by a similar figure in the last twenty years and carrier bags are 45% lighter than in 1990.

This effort and the use of new lighter materials has meant that although we buy more packaged items than ever, the weight of packaging put on the UK market has stayed relatively static (176 kg per person in 2007 compared with 175 kg per person in 1998).

Yet packaging continues to attract a lot of media attention - disproportionately so given its relatively small environmental impact. Just 3% of a household's total annual energy use is represented by packaging. To put that into context, if you were to

drive one and a quarter miles less per day - or to turn your thermostat down by two degrees - you'd save as much energy as is used to make the packaging for an average household's whole year's supply of packaged goods.

There's less packaging in household waste than most people think – 18% of the average dustbin is packaging according to government statistics. In landfill, packaging from all sources – businesses and households - is less than 5% of total waste by weight – and volume.

While common mythology puts packaging at the top of the litter list, it is in fact eclipsed by cigarettes and gum which account for the vast majority of all items that people drop as litter. Packaging makes up 1.3%, according to a survey in 2008* by Keep Britain Tidy. It's just that packaging is recognised and remembered because it is designed to stand out in retail displays as it does its job of providing us with a range of products to choose from. Incidentally in that same study, carrier bags were shown to make up 0.03% of items littered.

* Litter Composition Survey of England Aug-Oct 2008

Summer 2010