

Alternatives to plastic: sometimes it makes sense to retrace your steps

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On the occasion of the World Recycling Day, Richard Crossley, Sales Director – Alltub Group, questions the progress made by plastic packaging. He states that in certain instances there is a return to more recyclable materials used in the past.

Landmark decision: December 18th 2018 for the first time ever, the European Union adopts a law to reduce the amount of disposable plastic waste. By 2021 eight single-use plastic products will be prohibited: cutlery, plates, straws, food containers and polystyrene cups, coffee stirrers, cotton buds and balloon sticks. And not before time!

On a global level, plastic waste, and in particular waste from “single use plastics”, is destroying the environment – especially marine flora and fauna - with considerable costs for our society. The UN estimates the value of annual lost business for the fishing, tourist and healthcare sectors at around 8 billion US Dollars. For many years now we have been aware of the devastating impact of plastic, public concern and debate over the dangers of plastics continues to grow, for one simple reason: we, as consumers and as industrial producers, are already directly affected and are starting to notice the effects on our lives.

Action is being taken – but is it enough?

Failing to recycle plastic packaging already costs Europe 105 billion Euros each year¹. Even though 72% of European citizens say they sort their waste², so far the results do not match the scale of the challenge we face. Only 9% of the world’s total plastic waste is recycled³, with 12% incinerated and 79% ending up in the ocean! Obviously this can be improved, especially in France where the recycling rate for plastic packaging is stagnating at a level well below that for other materials such as paper, glass or metals.

But even if we succeed in increasing this rate, recycling has its limitations. From a technical perspective, recycled products are not as pure and are less functional than virgin products, and as a result market demand remains low. For example, only 6% of plastic bottles produced worldwide are made with recycled plastics⁴, as their composition and chemical profile makes them unsuitable for certain purposes. Last but not least, the market price of recycled plastics is so low that it offers little motivation for value chain investment.

¹ Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The New Plastics Economy, 2016

² Etude Eurobarometer: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_416_en.pdf

³ <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/7/e1700782.full>

⁴ <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/press-releases/greenpeace-report-reveals-plastic-footprint-worlds-largest-soft-drinks-companies-20170314/>

Rediscovering existing solutions : common sense

Plastic production and the incineration of plastic waste continue to grow year-on-year, generating approximately 400 million tonnes of CO₂ annually⁵ - in addition to other pollutants generated in the process. So what can be done? Flore Berlingen from the association Zéro Waste France recommends drastically reducing our plastic consumption at source, while others argue for new taxes on raw materials in order to make alternatives more competitive. But other solutions exist. Some are still being developed, for example bio-sourced materials which still need to prove their financial and environmental viability. Others exist since the dawn of the industrial age, and are now ripe to be rediscovered. One obvious example is glass and the famous bottle deposit schemes – vigorously opposed by some brands. Aluminium is another example ; Light, non-toxic for ecosystems, infinitely recyclable at a much lower financial and environmental cost than plastic, aluminium can also be an asset to brands on account of its design capabilities and desirable image.

Indeed, aluminum is already recycled very well: 95% of aluminum is recycled in the building and transport sectors. This rate is 50% for aluminum packaging but remains much higher than for plastic packaging (9%). Perceived as being more upmarket than plastic, aluminium is widely used in the pharmaceutical, cosmetic and luxury industries. Room for progress remains important however: the packaging sector, such as tubes, represents only 16% of aluminum consumption in France.

The alternative to plastic as a strategic choice

(Re)turning to aluminium may be a pertinent solution for many brands and producers. Before the rise of plastics, most toothpastes, creams and ointments were packed in aluminium tubes. Lightweight and malleable, aluminium is popular with designers, and its natural, authentic image chimes with the current consumer climate.

It is also an opportunity to support a local industry. Indeed, aluminum consumption is increasing from 1.1 million tonnes in France in 2014 (including 505,000 tonnes of recycled material, or nearly 43% of requirements) to 1.422 million tonnes in 2015 .

At a time when the potential for chemicals from plastic containers, and particularly endocrine disruptors, to leech into products is of increasing cause for concern, the use of neutral packaging is essential. In recent months we have seen a proliferation of anti-plastic communiqués from brands in many European countries. For example, Tesco recently launched a range of natural spring water in aluminium cans: CanO Water. A neat way of responding to ecological pressures while also standing out from the crowd in the highly-competitive supermarket sector.

⁵ Ellen Macarthur Foundation, The New Plastics Economy, 2016

What if moving away from plastic was a strategic choice?

Forced by external pressures or leading the next trend? It's a choice brands and producers will have to make. They know what needs to be done to reduce their dependence on plastic, for example by setting up deposit schemes or using other materials. In reality, they are still grappling with the legacy of decades of economic and aesthetic choices. In the past there was no compelling business argument for changing their ways, so many of them remain locked into old habits which keep consumers locked in too. And yet, planning ahead is one of the keys to innovation and differentiation in any market.

Industrial players and brands would be wrong to dismiss the potential advantages of adopting alternative materials, materials which make technical and financial sense while also giving them a more modern, ethical image. Overcoming our dependency on plastics can be a constraint, or a positive choice. It's now time for brands and producers to make that choice before regulatory pressures, fiscal reforms and public opinion make it for them – the process is already under way.

And when we know for example that the coverage of aluminum demand in France from recycling has already reached 47%⁶, it becomes difficult to find excuses.

By Richard Crossley, Sales Director – Alltub Group

⁶ <http://www.aluminium.fr/developpement-durable/recyclage-aluminium>