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Key theme of FachPack 2019 – “Environmentally friendly packaging” – Article series, part 4 of 4

Environmentally friendly processes: Labels to highlight sustainability

The key theme of the FachPack 2019 trade fair (24 to 26 September in Nuremberg) is “ Environmentally friendly packaging”. The primary reasons for choosing this theme are the popularity of environmentally friendly packaging with consumers and of course stricter requirements for recyclability under the amended German Packaging Act. During FachPack, the theme will be reflected in the exhibition booths of many exhibitors and will also be raised during presentation forums, at special shows, and when awarding prizes. A series of four articles in months preceding the trade fair highlights current trends in recycled packaging, materials to conserve resources, multi-use packaging and systems, and environmentally sound (new) processes. This is part 4 of 4.

Both industry and consumers want an environmentally friendly way to package products. Laser marking directly on products is a good example of how suppliers can respond to this aspiration. Laser marking uses no ink or adhesive, and it can also be easily integrated into automated processes. The EDEKA retailing group already uses it for organic fruit and veg. It started with mangos, ginger, sweet potatoes, and coconuts, to which information was applied using a laser. Now avocados, kiwi fruit, watermelon, pumpkin, citrus, and even cucumbers are available without labels. Known as “smart branding,” a high-resolution laser is used to apply lettering and a logo to the fruit. Only a bit of pigment on the outside of the peel is removed. The fruit isn’t damaged and taste, shelf life, and appearance aren’t affected.

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Labels made of cellulose, stone, and sugarcane

To improve the lifecycle assessment of labelling, companies also offer biodegradable labels made of renewable resources. This allows producers to provide environmentally compatible packaging for high-value products like organic food, drinks, and cosmetics. The label material and the adhesive are biodegradable. The top layer of compostable labels can be made of cellulose and can be disposed of in the organic waste bin or compost after use.

A similar approach is followed by suppliers of labels made of stone – more precisely, of ground stone powder. The powder is a waste product from quarries and is bound together using recycled polythene. The carbon footprint of stone paper, which doesn't use water or whiteners, is about two-thirds that of paper pulp. Users can also reduce petroleum consumption by applying labels made of bio-film, a synthetic based on renewables like sugarcane granulate, which can be processed like conventional polythene film.

Smart labels to reduce food waste

Labels can do more than help protect the environment because of the material they're made of: Smart labels or Sensor-Labels will someday determine how long food can be safely kept, helping to counter food losses. A study by the market research institute GfK Group estimates that every German discards an average of 55 kilos of food each year, which means that 4.4 million tonnes of food end up in the waste stream. Food production is subject to a high level of resource consumption, so avoiding food waste is a major contributor to environmental protection. There are now many projects and cooperative ventures among industry and researchers aimed at reducing food waste. The rather imprecise "best-before" date will be replaced by new options in the near future. Smart labels and sensors promise to put an end to the all-too-common practice of discarding food prematurely.

The possibilities offered by various labelling methods go far beyond simply applying information to a product. New technologies and functions are making labelling an increasingly important part of the packaging line.

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