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From niche market to widespread acceptance? “Unpackaged” expands the retail food trade’s portfolio

Unpackaged shops can now be found in every major city. Even retail chains have taken up the trend. The concept joins existing efforts to reduce packaging waste.

Regionality, organics and conscious shopping were already gaining momentum before the arrival of the coronavirus. A trend toward more environmentally aware purchasing decisions, with a particular emphasis on avoiding packaging waste, was already apparent. Such demands have given birth to movements like “zero waste” that focus on generating as little waste as possible. Unpackaged shops are part of this solution and embrace the zero waste mindset. The number of concept shops of this type is constantly growing. There were only four such shops in Germany in 2014, whereas today there are nearly 200 retailers who have taken up the cause of avoiding packaging.

The more pronounced trend toward regional products and purchasing from direct marketers that has come as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic also conforms to the unpackaged mindset. Standardized reusable containers reduce packaging across the entire supply chain, from the manufacturer to the consumer. The topic is also attracting a great deal of attention from the media and society, and even major retail companies have identified it as an important catalyst.

Barriers to implementation

Unpackaged shops are still the province of idealistic newcomers who end up paying dearly. Purchasing in bulk containers has its own set of challenges. A smaller shop also has to allow for a great deal of storage space to accommodate the large containers. Meanwhile, suppliers are looking for better purchasing solutions such as delivery in reusable containers, larger containers, and the reduced use of packaging materials in delivery.

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Once a package is opened, foods inevitably start to lose their flavour and retain their freshness and marketability only for a limited time. The protective, storage, transport, marketing and information functions that individual packages normally guarantee are also made more difficult by bulk containers. Nevertheless, a much greater challenge is changing customers' shopping habits. For example, impulse buying is generally impossible if the shopper hasn't brought along containers. Reusability concepts involving standardized containers could provide a remedy. For this to succeed, retailers have to cooperate with one another – including powerful retail companies, if at all possible.

Societal demands

In early 2020, the Innoredux research project sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) asked more than 1,000 people how innovative retail business models could reduce packaging waste along the value chain. The goal was to determine how prevalent the concern about avoiding packaging was among the people surveyed and what the potential was for unpackaged products. In this study, 99 percent of those surveyed said that less packaging material would be feasible for many products. Although these are subjective findings that are often impractical to implement, manufacturers should still make serious efforts to reduce packaging waste. They are already doing so by increasing efficiency and making better use of resources. Plastic films are becoming thinner, monomaterials are making recycling easier and less environmentally-friendly materials are being replaced by better solutions. As organic plastics become more highly developed, they often help improve the ecobalance. Since FACHPACK 2019 chose "Environmentally friendly packaging" as its motto, developments have continued and even buyers for major retail companies are demanding more sustainable packaging from their suppliers.

Reduced packaging and unpackaged go hand in hand

Thanks to Germany's amended Packaging Act, retailers also have a systematic incentive to reduce packaging waste. In addition to individual businesses, shop-in-shop offerings of unpackaged goods have also started to appear. This conforms to customer demands. According to the above-

mentioned survey, 97 percent of those questioned were in favour of unpackaged food departments in shops. So it comes as no surprise that in many places, “traditional” retailers are already adopting the unpackaged concept. This is somewhat easier for established dealers with existing infrastructure and storage options. Changing customers’ shopping practices is another hurdle that major retail companies can overcome more easily through standardized containers like those already offered in many supermarkets or through reusable container systems.

Widespread acceptance of the “unpackaged” concept seems rather unlikely. Nevertheless, shops that cater to customers’ demands for organics, regionality and sustainability are serving a growing niche market. Shop-in-shop solutions in conventional supermarkets and discount shops with a larger range of conventional, unpackaged products can continue to expand their selection in the future. Unpackaged solutions should not be seen as enemies of the packaging industry, but rather as an addition to the more efficient, more sustainable use of packaging.

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