

INDUSTRY ARTICLE

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Security of supply in the corona era: the protective function of packaging

In the corona crisis, packaging is playing an important role in helping to supply people with food, medicines and PPE. And more than ever, its most important characteristic – its protective function – is coming to the fore.

Without suitable packaging, none of these essential supplies would reach the market or the patient. Packaging ensures that the population is supplied with safe medicines, disinfecting agents, other medical products and food. Particularly in times of crisis, the product protection itself protects resources and prevents valuable products from being damaged or spoiled.

Hygiene – the crucial factor for medical products

Packaged products have to be protected from environmental influences to maintain their durability, hygiene and quality. Plastic packaging, for example, is especially suitable for transporting and storing medicines and other medical products. These versatile materials perform especially well thanks to their excellent barrier properties and impact resistance during filling and packaging processes and in logistics. In ICUs, on the other hand, medical products need to be quickly and hygienically to hand in emergencies. This is done using specially designed bags or trays, some of which also have antimicrobial surfaces.

As a result of the skyrocketing demand for hand sanitisers during the corona pandemic, packaging for disinfectants is also more in demand than ever. Even chemical giants that usually do not offer small package sizes are now decanting the coveted product into small size bottles for health workers, business owners and consumers.

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But the importance of the protective function of packaging is also becoming evident in the case of foodstuffs, as it prevents viruses and other harmful micro-organisms from coming into contact with the food in the first place. But the most important thing to note first is that according to the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR, Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung), the packaging itself poses no risk of infection. Naturally, however, people should follow the general rules of hygiene when preparing food. However, the BfR says that it is unnecessary to clean food or its packaging with soap or disinfecting agents.

Altered consumer behaviour necessitates suitable packaging

Consumer behaviour has changed as a result of the corona crisis. Increasingly, people are buying products with a longer shelf life, while the closure of restaurants is changing eating habits. To reduce financial losses and continue to serve their customers, many restaurant owners have reacted spontaneously by offering pick-up and delivery services. To deliver this outside catering service they also need suitable packaging for outside catering.

In times of crisis, retailers too increasingly switch to online offerings, web shops and mail order. The right packaging for mail order not only serves to protect the product and any returns necessary, but is also a marketing tool to offer customers an unboxing experience. Local producers and retailers are using online marketplaces to mitigate declining sales in their bricks-and-mortar businesses. This means that regional food producers, restaurants and direct sellers are experiencing great demand. Without the right kind of packaging this would not be possible. This new mainstay in e-commerce can also pay off for retailers and producers after the crisis is over.

Transport packaging ensures security of supply

Packaging plays an essential role in ensuring security of supply to the population. In its publication “Critical Infrastructure Guidelines: Food Companies”, the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture includes companies that produce packaging and packaging material for food industry products as being of systemic importance. In doing so the federal government is acknowledging the important role played by packaging to ensure the security of the food supply. This shows that Federal Agriculture Minister Klöckner agrees with the stated opinion of the HPV (Confederation

of Paper and Plastics Processing Industry), for example, that it is not only agriculture, food production, trade and commerce that are part of the critical food supply infrastructure but also their sub-suppliers, especially the packaging sector.

In this context, the supply chains and the supply to the population and the medical sector are dependent not just on primary packaging but also on transport packaging. In this area, corrugated board and pallets are very important, because in Germany, around two-thirds of all goods are packed in corrugated board to get them to the pallets in the shops and to the consumers.

Whether it's a question of hygienic protective packaging or transport packaging for safe logistics processes, the supply chains for food and medical products rely on the availability of suitable packaging. As a sector of systemic importance, the packaging industry is making an important contribution to mastering the corona crisis.

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