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It takes persistence to transform the packaging sector

Mondi is one of the world's leading players in the packaging and paper sector. As a manufacturer, it covers the entire value chain and develops solutions with a focus on sustainability.

You'll find flexible packaging from Mondi on supermarket shelves across Europe. As well as branded companies and private labels, online retailers and industrial companies also use Mondi's paper and plastic packaging in a multitude of applications. Thanks to ongoing research and development into more sustainable packaging solutions combined with its targeted acquisitions, the Group has evolved into a paper and packaging manufacturer that covers the entire value chain – from managing forests and producing pulp, paper and films to developing and manufacturing effective packaging solutions for industry and consumers.

Since 2004, Thomas Kahl has been supporting the company's development in various roles. Today, as Head of Sustainable Packaging Solutions, he is responsible for developing business with consumer goods manufacturers for sustainable product solutions. As has been the case for the entire sector, Mondi has also been facing more exacting demands on the sustainability of packaging in recent years, so is systematically addressing sustainability issues. "We are dealing with questions like: What makes our product more sustainable? How can we work together to find more sustainable solutions?" explains Thomas Kahl. "These questions require very detailed solutions to ensure that the goal of sustainability is actually achieved."

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Choice between paper and plastic

The responses offered by Mondi cover aspects like recyclability, the use of recyclates and mono-materials, or where useful, replacing plastic by paper. “Our integrated value chain combined with Mondi’s unique packaging DNA are what makes it especially exciting to work here. Because we cover the entire process chain, we are in a position to evaluate new ideas very effectively and implement them as quickly as possible. This means that depending on customer requirements, we can offer a wide range of sustainable product solutions or develop them in partnership with our customers,” says Kahl.

With its strong roots in paper manufacturing, Mondi is well versed in the benefits of this material, but at the same time is aware that the protective function of plastic makes it indispensable in many applications. The company has developed an ambitious plan for both kinds of material: With its Mondi Action Plan (MAP2030), Mondi has committed to making all its packaging reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025.

A look at the details

Different customers and markets call for a flexible and market-driven approach. The company’s consultants are guided in this process by its ‘EcoSolutions’ approach, which covers the various development phases. The first step is to discuss with the customer the goals they want to achieve, for example, replace plastic, reduce packaging volume or improve recyclability.

According to Kahl, customers in the retail segment in particular are showing great interest in paper solutions. “However, I also see strong demand for more sustainable plastic packaging,” he says. In this context, volume reduction especially is a valuable tool, alongside material composition. “With flexible plastics specifically, we have been able over the last few years to achieve 10 to 20 percent material savings while providing the same level of protection,” the expert stresses.

Another factor to be discussed in consultations with customers is the region where the product is to be sold and the laws and regulations that need to be

considered there. Also important is knowledge about the respective recycling infrastructure, because even within Europe very disparate conditions prevail. “Then of course you mustn’t forget the necessary protective functions. In this conjunction we can make use of mono-materials that protect the product but can still be recycled,” says Kahl. To ensure that these objectives can actually be realized by the customer, Mondi draws on its contacts with packaging machine manufacturers and expertise in the machinability of various materials on the various systems.

Flagship project with ground-breaking result

Taking all these factors into consideration, Mondi’s experts produce an overall concept that in addition to improving sustainability performance, can absolutely lead to economic benefits as well. In the UK, for example, distributors of plastic packaging can save tax (known as the plastics tax) if the plastic contains at least 30 percent recycled material. Moreover, EPR (extended producer responsibility) costs can also be saved by replacing plastic with paper solutions.

At Mondi’s stand at FACHPACK in Nuremberg from 27 to 29 September, this customer-centric approach encompassing the entire value chain will take centre-stage. With a stand tour to various packaging machine manufacturers that Mondi works closely with, the company will also show the importance of collaboration between various partners in the packaging segment. “From our experience, we know that the transformation process necessitates cooperation. You must work with partners towards the goal,” says Kahl.

In this conjunction, he points to a project that particularly underscores this point: the stand-up pouch for the Frosch brand of Werner & Mertz. This recyclable refill pouch is the result of a multi-year joint research project that produced a completely new packaging design. “It was an incredibly strong partnership in which we mutually benefitted from one another,” Kahl recalls. Also on board were all important external partners like packaging machine manufacturers, the Grüne Punkt (green dot) recycling network, and recycling companies. “Together, the project participants began to “reverse engineer” the

recycling process to ensure that the packaging would work at each stage of the process – especially in the often-problematic waste material separation phase. Mondi then invested in a new facility at an early stage, even before we had sold a single product,” Kahl continues. Despite this, Mondi had seen the project from the very outset as an opportunity and not a risk. The pouch has been available since the end of 2019, and in the meantime has already won several prestigious awards.

Successes like these are what excite Kahl so much about the packaging industry. His greatest motivation is to close the loop. And he believes that the industry is already on the right track to achieving this goal. “I have been working in the sector for three decades, but never have I experienced so much momentum as in the recent past.” Nevertheless, he expects that the company will still have a few challenges to face: “The commercial pressure will increase due to rising inflation. This means that consumers will have less money available. This effect is being intensified by the war in Ukraine and increasing raw material prices.” Despite these adverse circumstances, he believes it is important not to let up with efforts to realize the closed-loop economy, and to have the persistence to complete the transformation of the sector.

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