



**27.-29.9.2022
NÜRNBERG**

Story

31 May 2022

The packaging sector in transition: A huge task

Matthias Giebel has been a consultant in the packaging sector for many years. As a partner for sustainability and innovation at B+P, he knows where further consulting services are needed.

Berndt+Partner has made a name for itself as a leading consulting firm in the packaging and mechanical engineering sectors. Matthias Giebel describes his task: “Our approach is to support the industry by having a broad view of the entire sector in order to turn sustainability and innovations into reality as success factors for our customers’ companies.” The experts look at the actual situation at the customer’s end and help with the next major step – and right now that’s sustainability, beyond any doubt.

On the path to sustainability, the sector has not always been as rigorous as it might have been, despite achieving a few key milestones along the way. “In the early 1990s, we had initial discussions on the subject with the then Minister of the Environment, Dr Töpfer,” Giebel recalls. “That was the first time that packaging waste was on the agenda. Then, when the dual systems were introduced, the subject disappeared again.” The discussion about climate and the carbon footprint of packaging, which arose in 2008 and 2009, also quickly fell silent again.

“Now we’re in the third wave: According to the latest reports we don’t have much time left if we are to limit the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees,” Giebel continues. “We all realise now how important climate protection is. Then there’s the pollution of the world’s oceans. A consequence of both these aspects is that consumers are taking a much more critical stand on packaging – especially plastic packaging.” But another result was that manufacturers now really are prepared to put greater investment into more sustainable solutions. “We are getting a very clear picture that brand items have begun moving in this direction.”

Focus on climate-friendliness and the circular economy

As Giebel observes, businesses are following two strategies in particular: making packaging more climate-friendly, and reducing the amount of fossil-

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based plastics in packaging. “These can sometimes be conflicting goals, but we’re talking about a systemic transformation,” Giebel asserts. In isolated cases, re-using packaging may be worse than disposable packaging from a sustainability perspective. “But if you consider the situation systemically and analyse what happens when relevant portions of the market are changed over to re-use, the picture changes.” As he describes it, the same applies to the comparison between fibre-based raw materials and plastics, for which there will, of course, also be differing environmental benefits now and then. In this connection it is also worth considering that, even in Europe, opportunities to recycle are not the same everywhere, and that is even more true in the rest of the world.

Another important pillar of the transformation, in Giebel’s view, is making the circular economy a reality. Although the major players had a head start, SMEs are now catching up: “We’re observing competition in terms of innovation – to see who can come up with new and better solutions.” Giebel believes there is still room for improvement, however, in the use of recyclates, especially for food-grade qualities; in other words, packaging that is permitted to come into contact with foodstuffs.

Transformation – a huge task

To meet future demands, brand items must be structured on sustainable principles from start to finish, and that includes packaging development. That means packaging departments have their work cut out for them. The switch to more sustainable materials is not easy, and requires a lot of development input. “It’s a huge task,” says Giebel. “Brand items rely heavily on support from the packaging manufacturers.” With specific regard to the transformation, it may still be easy to convert an individual product line to a different packaging. But it is a huge challenge to do that for many lines simultaneously.

Giebel also perceives that many SMEs currently underestimate the amount of regulatory pressure they face. Under the Green Deal, manufacturers would have to cope with a lot of planned legislation. Based on the European Commission’s plans, various measures will be required in this connection to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050. “SMEs often cannot accurately assess the consequences that particular requirements will have for their business, especially given that the Green Deal is focusing on the packaging industry.”

Taking carbon emissions as the standard

As Giebel puts it, the EU's Green Deal creates a number of important motivating factors. The fact action is needed for brand items is now understood. "Everyone realises that this subject is not just a trend but is here for the long term," Giebel says. "But the Green Deal gives us an opportunity to achieve something, and we are giving the transition all we've got." He notes that it has been a long time since there have been so many innovations in the field of packaging.

But businesses need a lot of expertise to deal with formal aspects such as climate strategy, carbon pricing, and the plastic tax. "Management first has to be given training in order to appreciate what all that actually means for the business, and which data is relevant for reporting."

There are, however, critical benefits in dealing with these demands and the risks that climate change poses for business activities: "It will make the sector more resilient to other influencing factors such as Covid-19."

Dealing with its own carbon footprint and, in the near future, that of the entire supply chain will keep the sector very busy in the coming years. That also includes another look at business trips, as Giebel notes: "I firmly believe we will travel less in future. We will have to think carefully about how we travel, and where." He also believes trade fairs will have to justify themselves: "If trade fairs, networking and conferences can take place under a single roof, that will significantly boost the relevance of the event. That was one aspect I was very pleased with at last year's FACHPACK." There will be an opportunity to hear from Matthias Giebel again on 29 September as part of the PACKBOX Forum at FACHPACK 2022.



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