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Story

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Sustainability needs the big picture

In 1973, Professor Götz Werner opened his first “dm-Markt” – a drugstore chain that has been known ever since for its holistic and social philosophy. It’s therefore no surprise that the company also aims to be a leader in sustainable packaging.

dm has been the drugstore business with the highest turnover in Germany for many years now, proving that market success and responsibility are not mutually exclusive. That’s why it now wants to take a leading position in sustainability, especially in dealing with the environmental impacts of its products and packaging. That’s no easy task for the company, with its 41,000 employees, more than 12,500 articles in its stores and over 18,000 in its online shop.

It therefore sought scientific support from Berlin University in drawing up meaningful sustainability profiles. “For us, the key thing is not to pick out just a single aspect, such as product packaging, but to make constant improvements to the entire environmental footprint of our range,” says Dagmar Glatz, a trained plastics engineer who is responsible for more sustainable packaging at dm. These calculations enabled the company to discover where the best potentials for improvement could be found, and then turn them into reality.

Even if the share of the carbon footprint of the products and their environmental impacts that can be attributed to packaging is relatively low, the company set itself some ambitious goals in this area, and has already achieved a number of milestones. By the end of 2021, for example, 33 percent of the plastic mixes used in dm brand product packaging were already being sourced from recycled material. By 2025, 90 percent of the packaging must be recyclable, and the proportion of plastic must be reduced by 45 percent compared to 2018. All non-food plastic packaging must also have a recycled material component of at least 50 percent by that point.

**Veranstalter
Organizer**
NürnbergMesse GmbH
Messezentrum
90471 Nürnberg
Germany
T +49 9 11 86 06-0
F +49 9 11 86 06-82 28
fachpack@nuernbergmesse.de
www.fachpack.de

**Vorsitzender des Aufsichtsrates
Chairman of the Supervisory Board**
Marcus König
Oberbürgermeister der Stadt Nürnberg
Lord Mayor of the City of Nuremberg

**Geschäftsführer
CEOs**
Dr. Roland Fleck, Peter Ottmann

**Registergericht
Registration Number**
HRB 761 Nürnberg

Environmentally friendly packaging starts with efficient material use

The main goal of the strategy is to make savings in the packaging materials. "This is a particularly effective lever," says Glatz. Close inspection enabled further reductions to be achieved, even with glass and plastic bottles that were already very thin. That resulted in a further substantial reduction in material use. "We are still trying to save as much primary packaging material as possible," she adds. The same goes for transport packaging. "After all, there's no point in saving on product packaging if that means we have to use more packaging to protect the product during transportation." That's why she firmly believes that considering the system as a whole is the only way to achieve the desired effect.

"Of course, there is still scope for further savings, but it isn't unlimited," Glatz observes. At that point, further savings would depend on new product strategies. She offers examples such as shampoos, body lotions and shaving foam, all in solid form. Even so, new product strategies have to fit in with the overall life-cycle assessment: "Reducing packaging materials must not negatively impact on sustainability in other areas – in production, for example."

It's also important not to focus solely on plastics but to investigate the sustainability aspect of all materials. Every product must be considered individually to determine, for example, whether glass or recycled plastic offers a better life-cycle assessment. "All systems require further refinement, whether we are talking about plastic, paper or glass."

Recyclate Forum: a driving force

It quickly became clear to dm that this could be achieved only by working with partners all along the value chain. In 2018, therefore, it launched the Recyclate Forum, a platform that regularly brings players from industry, the retail trade, waste disposal and policy-making together around the table. "What struck me most in this context was that it isn't enough for dm just to take its partners with it along this path," says Glatz. "Instead, all the players on the market need to be included, to ensure we're all moving in the same direction. I believe that's the only way to turn the circular economy into reality."



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In recent years, the Recyclate Forum has launched a number of processes and achieved progress in areas such as labelling for products containing a high proportion of recycled material. An important milestone is also the ability to record the proportion of recyclates in packaging materials in the GDSN (Global Data Synchronisation Network), where certified master data is pooled at an international level. That makes it possible to communicate information that's relevant to sustainability transparently within supply networks.

That also gave dm the opportunity to highlight the proportion of recycled material in packaging at the POS. "Many manufacturers were encouraged to act when we decided to highlight every product containing more than 70 percent recyclates at the POS," says Glatz. "You could easily see just how high the proportion of recyclates in many products had risen." The Recyclate Forum also set the second, equally important attribute: recyclability. By no later than the third quarter of 2023, these values must also be documented in product barcodes. "The fact we offer packaging that in some cases is made of 100-percent recycled materials shows it's wrong to believe that nothing gets recycled," Glatz asserts. The greyish colour of HDPE bottles used for products such as soap makes the recyclate content evident.

Customers have the choice

Technological developments for plastic recycling are advancing on many levels. That's why dm always keeps its eye out for exciting new applications. These include CO₂ recycling, which uses captured carbon dioxide as a source of the basic chemicals needed for plastic manufacture.

LanzaTech, a partner company to dm, has developed a biochemical technology that uses it to make ethanol. In turn, that can be used as an ingredient in products or as a sustainable raw material for plastic packaging. It is already being used as a raw material for some PET packaging. "We have already analysed this process in terms of its overall life-cycle assessment, and the numbers speak in its favour," Glatz reveals. This process won the German Packaging Award at FACHPACK 2021.



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As for the customers, Glatz believes it's important to let them choose between sustainable and conventional products. "Because the details are highlighted, they can clearly see what makes a product more sustainable, they can see the price, and then they can make their own conscious decision," says Glatz, summing up. "We are not creating a 'green corner'. We aren't telling people what to do. We just want to offer the best possible advice and the products to match."

Contact for press and media

Katja Feess, Christina Freund

T +49 9 11 86 06-83 55

christina.freund@nuernbergmesse.de

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