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Story

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The courage to be sustainable

Frozen foodstuffs manufacturer FRoSTA is known for rigorously pursuing responsible and sustainable solutions, even in the face of strong resistance. What's next for this pioneering company?

Most people in Germany will be familiar with Peter, the advertising face of Bremerhaven-based frozen foods specialist FRoSTA. Even if he doesn't really exist, all the employees at FRoSTA feel there is something of Peter in them. That includes Alexander Klein, Head of Packaging & Process Development. Klein trained in dairy technology and then studied food technology before beginning his career at FRoSTA. He started in Product Development and subsequently switched to Packaging & Process Development.

He has headed this department since last year, and is pressing ahead with the company's ambitious visions: "Sustainability is the key consideration with our packaging developments. My predecessor was a pioneer in sustainability, and introduced some important measures at an early stage." The efforts by the packaging department complement the company's overall strategy. As early as 2003, FRoSTA ventured onto the rocky path of using only natural ingredients and no additives in its products as part of a purity drive. That also applies to items that are not immediately obvious to consumers, such as anticaking agents in salt. "Initially, the sales figures didn't really support our efforts, but we're pleased we survived that first stage and have been very successful in this regard," Klein sums up. He adds: "It was the right thing to do at the time, since consumers have become more critical since then and look at the list of ingredients as a matter of course." The purity drive for its ingredients quickly made it clear that the next logical step would be to include the packaging, too.

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“New packaging must always offer benefits in terms of sustainability”

As early as 2008, FRoSTA took part in a pilot project to work out its carbon footprint, which produced concrete figures regarding the impacts of its packaging on the climate for the first time. “That was a major milestone, and it showed us that we had to make changes in our packaging,” Klein comments. In 2013 the company therefore decided to replace the aluminium trays it used for its frozen meals with PET-coated trays. “The goal of sustainability is firmly anchored in our company, and that includes packaging,” says Klein. “If we introduce new packaging, it must always have a positive impact, not only for the consumer but also in terms of the carbon footprint. And if there is no suitable solution, the developers have to put their heads together and keep on trying until a material is found that will satisfy the stringent demands in terms of food safety and machinability.

Interactions along the entire value chain

That led in 2016 to the development of the first monofilm bag in the frozen foods market. It makes recycling easier compared to the usual composite films. “There were a few hurdles to overcome,” recalls Klein. “Sealability was a major challenge, for example, and that took a lot of thinking to resolve in order to avoid impacting on its good tactile properties.”

The development process took place in close consultation with the film suppliers. “It simply won’t work without them,” Klein emphasises. That is why he always has his eye open for new and more sustainable solutions. One source of information for Klein is FACHPACK in Nuremberg: “It’s where you meet all the major manufacturers, and you can look forward to fruitful interaction. I can seek other opinions and stay up to date. Nuremberg is also easy to get to, and it has good train access, which is a positive argument from the perspective of your carbon footprint.”

The transformation continues

FRoSTA understood from the outset that a circular economy can work only if suppliers, manufacturers and recyclers talk to each other: “We dealt in depth with the dual system in order to gain experience with which materials are easiest to separate out and reuse at the recycling facilities.” That’s why the bags are kept very white – the brighter the base material, the easier it is to identify the packaging at the recycling facilities and separate it out. Brighter granulates are also better for use in new packaging, as Klein explains. “At the time, the design wasn’t exactly modern, and so it was a bold step.”



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For FRoSTA, “Transition in Packaging”, this year’s theme for FACHPACK, means not just sticking to a given solution and resting on one’s laurels. Wherever practical, in terms of sustainability and carbon footprint, the plastic bags are now being replaced with paper material. “Developing our paper bags wasn’t easy, since our packaging systems are designed to work with plastic film,” observes Klein, describing the challenges. “Making the switch to paper took a lot of trial-and-error.”

As Klein explains, the overriding goal is to ensure that packaging has no negative impacts on the environment. “In the longer term, that could mean biodegradable materials that break down better in composting systems than is currently the case.” A solution involving raw materials that could not become part of a cycle would be less ideal in his view.

The entirely positive feedback from consumers is evidence for Klein that the company’s ambitions in developing responsible products are being well received. “It also gives me the courage to keep moving in this direction,” he notes. “For example, a buyer once made a postcard from one of our collapsible boxes and sent us a very nice message. That’s another form of recycling.”

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