

What is the future of plastic packaging?

The latest Consumer Brands Forum session heard brand and regulatory perspectives on the issue of plastic packaging

The removal of plastics in packaging is slowly gaining momentum, with news headlines frequently depicting the small steps retailers and businesses alike take towards reducing plastic consumption.

The Consumer Brands Forum met on 17 September to discuss the latest government initiatives as well as the steps Iceland is taking in this context. The session welcomed **Stuart Lendrum**, Head of Packaging, **Iceland** and **Hannah Woodrose**, Policy Advisor, **Valpak**, as speakers, and was chaired by **Geoff Skingsley**, Chairman, **L'Oréal UK Ltd**.

Iceland's pledge

Supermarket chain Iceland is taking an all or nothing approach to reducing plastic waste in the company. It has pledged to remove all plastic from its packaging by 2023.

Stuart Lendrum, Head of packaging at Iceland, explains that their current tonnage of waste is approximately 13,000 tonnes. This is small in comparison to some companies but Lendrum says the amount still 'resonates' when this translates to 2.5bn pieces of plastic. The figure should be taken in context to see how this waste feeds back into the ecosystem in the form of microplastics.

Lendrum highlights the role of the consumer in encouraging a reduction in the consumption of plastic packaging. He emphasised that this comes and goes as an issue amongst consumers, but the current customer response is more complex. For example, the location of the customer changes how the issue is viewed, whether as a litter problem, a water pollutant, a lack of recyclability of the materials or a pure focus on climate change.

Lendrum says that consumers now want brands to take the lead over retailers or the government. However, this must be implemented carefully as



consumers are reticent to change when they are asked to do things that are 'far from their normal behaviour.'

So how should this be introduced?

A transitional approach

'Plastic free is a destination,' says Lendrum. The use of biodegradable, recyclable or compostable plastic is still plastic. Iceland is therefore 'taking a single-issue approach to this destination but not a single-issue approach to the solution.'

The solution itself must be sustainable for the business. The aim is to de-risk the situation for the customers, suppliers and stakeholders. Deciding to move from using plastic packaging today to plastic-free tomorrow is an 'insurmountable wall'. In reality, the best approach is transitional, taking steps 'with a clear destination in mind to reach that horizon.'

The supporting regulatory landscape

Hannah Woodrose, Policy Advisor at packaging compliance scheme, Valpak, outlines that companies with a turnover greater than £2 million and waste of more than 50 tonnes are currently obliged to recover and recycle a percentage of their share of packaging put into the UK market.

Proof is in the form of packaging

waste recovery notes (PRNs) which are dispensed by accredited recycling processors. Companies can choose to shoulder the obligation or join a compliance scheme, such as Valpak, which takes on the legal obligation of obtaining evidence for this recycling.

Four consultations have recently taken place across the UK with regards to the next steps in limiting plastics in packaging:

- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR): Aims for full net cost recovery, where 100 percent of the costs associated with dealing with waste packaging are borne by producers rather than the local authorities.
- Deposit return schemes (DRS): Returning bottles for re-use, for example.
- Consistent Collection (CC): Currently councils all have individual recycling systems. This should change to ensure it is easier for the consumer to 'do the right thing.'
- Plastic Tax: A tax proposed for plastics comprised of less than 30% recycled materials. This aims to be introduced by April 2022 and the full details will be released the Autumn budget.

These government level measures are not about eliminating or preventing plastics, but primarily about waste management. There is still a long way to go in the fight to reach the plastics-free end goal. ■ SL