E-commerce and Sustainable Packaging
The impact of the holidays

If we want to quantify the amount of waste that packaging is responsible for, the holiday season is a good place to start.

As much as we love to decorate our houses with trees, it’s actually our least green time of year in the calendar. As our festive spending takes off, the amount of waste created follows suit.

Between Thanksgiving and New Year, there is an extra 1,000,000 tons of waste thrown away every week (an increase of 25% on the rest of the year!)

So, what is responsible for this increase? Much of it comes in the form of packaging - wrapping paper, gift tags, boxes...most of which cannot be recycled and ends up in landfills.

There are almost 38,000 miles of ribbon discarded at the end of each year - that’s enough to tie a bow around planet earth!
Why we need sustainable packaging

This amount of waste is also set to increase. We are becoming increasingly reliant on eCommerce to fulfill our gift obligations.

Annual eCommerce sales are set to hit $4.5 trillion by 2021, a staggering 246% increase since 2014. The convenience and global reach of online shopping have meant some great opportunities for brands, but more eCommerce sales mean more packaging materials – and more waste degrading our planet.
Since the majority of packaging is composed of plastic, this is especially catastrophic. Recycling efforts already cannot meet the mass production of plastics – a rate of almost 300 million tonnes a year- so the majority of it ends up in our oceans and ecosystems. It’s estimated that if things continue as they are plastic will outweigh fish by 2050. In short, the status quo of packaging has devastating consequences.

Yet we all know that a target of zero packaging is not realistic. Goods need to be shipped efficiently and be protected during transit. In some industries, there is the safety of consumers to consider. The packaging itself is not the problem; the problem is that the materials we use aren’t designed with the environment in mind.

So, what is the answer to the current crisis?

Developing sustainable packaging solutions which are better for the planet, and for businesses.

UPS shipped **750 million** packages during the holiday period alone last year! Moreover, this is a trend which is set to stay year-round.
What does sustainable packaging mean in practice?

There is no standard definition of sustainable packaging, which makes this somewhat of a moving target for businesses. Many guidelines are filled with scientific jargon, which doesn’t help anyone in getting to grips with the nuts and bolts of the issue.

But the bottom line is actually pretty simple; a high-quality sustainable alternative will meet the same needs and achieve the same performance as traditional packaging designs - with the added bonus of protecting the environment.
TO BE FUNCTIONAL
Packaging always has a purpose. If it didn’t, it wouldn’t be such an essential business expense. This complicates the affordances that eco-friendly packaging needs to have, because it’s about far more than being able to efficiently send your goods from A to B. It also provides safety for consumers, provides important product information, and increasingly is a powerful branding strategy for online sales channels. So, whether it’s for protecting your product or for creating some eye-catching Instagram content, sustainable packaging needs accomplish the same as its unsustainable counterparts. This means different color options, size options, and also custom design offerings if businesses are to see sustainable packaging as a viable alternative.

TO BE AFFORDABLE
If it’s out of the reach of many businesses, can it be truly sustainable? Eco-friendly packaging has often been synonymous with ‘expensive’ and ‘inefficient’ because of its comparison to plastics. Despite being environmentally destructive, plastic is a wonder material in many other ways. It has many virtues which have traditionally prevented businesses from making the switch to more sustainable options. It’s light, strong, flexible, and most importantly, very cheap and easy to produce. Sustainable designs need to be a pull factor in this area, rather than a push factor. It’s impossible to see a global shift towards eco-friendly alternatives if every stage of business isn’t being catered to. Whether you are a start-up or a global corporation, there need to be options which are scalable to the size of any operation.

TO PROTECT THE PLANET
Packaging has usually outside of the ‘circular economy’ because plastic has a very linear pattern of use; it gets produced, used (often only once) and then disposed of. This is what makes its environmental impact so devastating. The reduce, reuse and recycle mantra is by now a pretty mainstream concept, and this is at the center of sustainable design considerations. Simply put, sustainable packaging minimizes waste during production and disposal and maximizes the use of materials that have a small footprint. This keeps packaging from falling outside the circle of reuse and recovery (and from then on, into landfills and waterways).
What sort of materials are available?

Hey! I’m a 100% Compostable Mailer.

Bioplastics are starting to take a prominent place in eco-packaging because they have many possible applications.

Like traditional petroleum-based plastics, they can be molded into various different shapes, but come from renewable sources and so emit far fewer greenhouse gases. The most common sources are fermented starches such as corn and wheat, as they are highly durable and also biodegradable.

To replace the ever-present plastic bag, plant fibers such as jute and hemp are becoming widely used as containers. With R&D now starting to ramp up on finding alternatives to plastics, there will be even more options to choose from in the future.
So, why make the switch?

IT’S WHAT CONSUMERS WANT

Consumers are becoming much more conscious of the impact of their purchasing decisions, and they want to know what the brands they like are doing to offset the impact of their operations.

These concerns are only set to grow more mainstream, as Millennials and Generation Z grow to make up the bulk of the consumer market.

These generations are characterized by their commitment to brands who have a positive social or environmental impact. Increasingly, businesses will need to demonstrate this if they want to harness this audience.

As both a marketing and branding tool for your business, your packaging presents a very public face to your customer. It’s a visual pitch for your brand, and so says more about your ethos than you might think. Actions always speak louder than words, so a sustainable packaging design tells consumers that you truly walk the walk.

The Nielsen Global Survey on Corporate Social Responsibility found that

55% of respondents would pay extra for goods from companies that are committed to environmental responsibility.

52% would check the packaging to measure their impact.

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IT IMPROVES EFFICIENCY

Exactly how and why we package goods the way we do is rarely questioned. All of us have received items packaged in pointless plastic bags, or too-big boxes which need to be stuffed with non-recyclable filler. Not only is this unsustainable, it’s also expensive. Businesses end up spending more money than they need to on packaging because conventional designs often fail to deliver on efficiency. A packaging revamp is a great opportunity not only to go eco-friendly, but also to cut out unnecessary elements. The end result not only protects the environment – it saves your pocket too!

IT’S JUST THE RIGHT THING TO DO

Let’s face it: our planet is in a pretty dire state. As some of the biggest perpetrators of waste, businesses have a responsibility to address their footprint. Slowly, we are seeing a more united effort by corporations to take a more socially responsible approach to their operations.

In 2018 over 250 global companies, including brands such as Unilever, Nestle, and Coca-Cola, pledged to implement 100% recyclable, biodegradable or compostable packaging by 2050.

This is a promising step towards sustainable packaging becoming the norm across industries. It’s so much better to be a part of the solution, rather than a part of the problem!
Unsustainable packaging designs

**IF YOU’RE USING:**

**Single-use packaging items**

We have already explored why plastic packaging is so harmful, and a lot of this comes down to the fact that it’s considered ‘single-use’ due to low production costs.

It’s a startling fact that a plastic bag has an average use time of just 12 minutes – from the moment it’s received to when it’s thrown away.

With this in mind, it’s hard to see those 12 minutes as a reasonable exchange for up to 1000 years of damage done to our planet.

**INSTEAD CONSIDER:**

**Reusable packaging**

One of the largest short-term fixes to plastic pollution is to encourage the reuse of packaging. Many of us already have a stack of empty cardboard boxes in the garage because they are useful to have around. This mentality can be applied to other packaging elements as well. We throw away the plastic wrapping on our items because it has no further use. Using a jute bag as packaging for your product, by comparison, invites many further opportunities for reuse because it offers intrinsic value to your customer.

By keeping packaging elements in circulation longer, wastage can be reduced. Because plant fibers are biodegradable, they also provide an eco-friendly disposal option when the time comes. It’s also important that your customers are aware of the affordances of your packaging. A 2018 study on consumer behavior found that a lack of knowledge about the benefits of sustainable packaging was one of the primary reasons for its slow uptake. Making sure that this information is readily available, either printed on your packaging or in the form of packaging inserts, helps to combat misconceptions.
Soy-based inks have been around for a while, but are growing in popularity as an alternative because they are both eco-friendly and affordable. Soybeans are highly sustainable because the crop needs no irrigation, meaning the production process has a low environmental footprint. The ink releases less than 20% of the VOCs that get released by petroleum inks, making it much safer for consumers. It can also be easily removed during from papers during the recycling process. Best of all, the colors produced by soy-based ink are more much more vibrant than its petroleum-based counterpart, which will help you in creating an eye-catching packaging design!

**IF YOU’RE USING:**

**Petroleum-based inks**

Adding branding elements to your packaging is a great marketing strategy. But this means ink, and not all ink is created alike; this can have a big impact on the overall sustainability of your design. Many traditional inks are made from petroleum because they are relatively easy to produce and have a fast drying time. However, petroleum is a non-renewable energy source. It also admits Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) many of which are carcinogenic, meaning it isn’t the safest option for consumers. It also makes the papers and cardboards it gets used on unrecyclable, undermining your sustainability efforts.

**INSTEAD CONSIDER:**

**Soy-based inks**

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It's possible to still channel a luxury feel in your product without having to resort to so much packaging (and a lot of extra expense). Replacing cellophane and plasticized gift wrap with tissue paper will allow your product to maintain its flair, whilst minimizing waste that can't be recycled. Larger packaging elements such as boxes can put quite a dent in your budget, and also add a lot of weight. If you operate an eCommerce store, this likely means a more expensive shipping process. The fewer materials you have, the lighter your package will be, and the more it will save your business in this area.

Using mailer envelopes for your smaller orders, and reserving boxes for only larger deliveries, will help to reduce both costs and your environmental footprint.

**IF YOU’RE USING:**

**Over-packaging**

This can be seen in many industries, but is especially common at the luxury end of retail. The common logic is that to justify the price the product must be made to look expensive, and packaging is a great way to influence this perception. Cue very large boxes, boxes within boxes (i.e. the ‘Russian doll’ effect”) miles of cellophane and individually wrapped items. This might look impressive, but it’s totally unnecessary to this end as well as providing a huge amount of excess materials for consumers to dispose of. ‘Reduce’ is always the first sustainable option on the table; if the waste isn’t there in the first place, then recycling or reuse options don’t need to be considered!

**INSTEAD CONSIDER:**

**Paper over plastic**

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The Wrap Up:

Sustainable packaging doesn't have to be an expensive or inefficient option for your business. As this increasingly becomes an expectation on behalf of consumers, you can not only do your part for the planet but create a key selling point for your brand. As a sector which is only going to grow in the coming years, more exciting innovations await!