



Editorial article first published in July 2004

This box will self destruct...

It's estimated that in the UK alone in excess of 1 BILLION plastic sandwich cartons are used on an annual basis. Just think about that for a moment – 1 BILLION bits of plastic that we don't recycle and just chuck straight in the bin. If you then think about the energy that goes into making them, the pollution generated and the raw materials used, it should make you start to question why on Earth this continues to be the preferred choice for many large retailers.

Convenience and cost are the obvious answers. Retailers argue that consumers want a quality product, with consistency of manufacture at a price they can afford. Plastic delivers this because it is cheap, is easy to handle, can be heat sealed and gas flushed. This means that the shelf life can be extended for anything up to 8 days... and this of course means that the resulting sandwich tastes exactly like the plastic it's packed in.

Consumers clearly don't want this and sandwich manufacturing has subsequently improved dramatically in the last couple of years. Cardboard is now the preferred choice for top end and 'gourmet' sandwiches and there is no question that these packs are associated with a fresher, higher quality product.

However, many retailers still don't see the opportunity and those that do, are then unfortunately faced with a problem of a different kind.

Perception is reality

Since mainstream cardboard skillets were introduced 5 years ago there has always been an assumption that they were fully biodegradable. There is, of course, no question that they are more environmentally friendly than plastic packs but the impression that they are either fully biodegradable or easily recyclable is false.

All packs have plastic windows and the vast majority also carry a 15gsm PE (polyethylene) coating on the inside that acts as a moisture barrier.

This means that although the exterior board will biodegrade the interior PE coating and window will not – in fact they will stay in the environment for 100's of years until they eventually break down into their component parts.

This also makes the products difficult to recycle as the PE coating has to be stripped from the board before the pulp can be salvaged.

Given these factors, as a company, we established some 18 months ago that there was a manifest need for a viable alternative to what was being perceived in the marketplace as a fully biodegradable product.

The importance of choice.

Dealing with retailers on a day to day basis gave us an insight into momentum that was gathering towards the use of cardboard packs. More and more they were saying that their customers were asking why they were not using a more environmentally friendly product.

Many made the assumption that cardboard skillets were fully biodegradable, and it's easy to understand why. We found that when asked, suppliers and manufacturers would often unintentionally misrepresent the facts. Even contacting the major trade organizations made us realise that most companies and individuals were unaware of the issues involved.

We have now spent in excess of 8 months researching and testing new materials and have for the last 2 months been offering the choice of a fully biodegradable pack to those companies that have expressed an interest - and that interest is growing day by day.

The Soho Sandwich Company is the first of a stream of companies that will start to use our new range of biodegradable products in August. This range includes both 'FRESH' 24 hour shelf life packs and a new range of 72 hour heat sealable packs that become available in September.

Cost issues

The main barrier to entry has always been cost. Many distributors and manufacturers will tell you that the market is too price sensitive to accept cardboard as the norm let alone the option of going fully biodegradable. But our experience in talking to many end users is that this is not the case. Of course there are retailers who will never change, but there are a growing number of companies who see the value in connecting with their customers by addressing environmental concerns.

So let's put the costs into perspective: to move up from plastic to cardboard will increase costs by an average 2-5p per pack (the difference being dependent on volume, style, current pricing, own branding etc.) The additional move to a fully

biodegradable pack adds another 1p. This means that if you are looking at going straight from plastic to a fully biodegradable product it could cost you up to 6p per pack.

This is not an insignificant amount and would be a problem if there were no perceived added value. But there is a tremendous benefit to using cardboard as customers associate it with a fresher, higher quality product. Retailers who have embraced the concept have simply increased prices to allow for the additional cost and have still enjoyed increased business levels. As an example, companies that have moved from plastic to our 'Premium Graphic' range of cardboard packs have seen average net increases in sandwich sales of over 20%.

The move to cardboard therefore helps build brand awareness and loyalty, it helps retailers connect with their customers on both an environmental and social level AND it increases profits... I would have said that was pretty compelling stuff.

For our part we are continuing to push the boundaries forward and are aiming to dramatically increase awareness of the issues involved. This includes creating new ranges of bespoke products for customers and in partnering with distribution companies on promotional and marketing initiatives.

The hope is that in the not too distant future when you see the words '***This box will self destruct***' on the side of a sandwich pack it will be something more than a marketing message.

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