



Shifting Obstacles to Opportunities

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Abstract

While waste management, plastics production, and recycling sectors at first glance appear only tangentially some places linked, some places not linked to essential services, they are intimately connected to a thriving economy and critical public health roles. Plastics bags, single use plastics have been banned in many countries but during the pandemic the same plastics have played a major role in saving lives. It is thus imperative to have a holistic approach and use plastics judiciously and convert the obstacles to opportunities by way of reduce, reuse and recycle.

Keywords: Waste Management; COVID-19; Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

While waste management, plastics production, and recycling sectors at first glance appear only tangentially some places linked, some places not linked to essential services, they are intimately connected to a thriving economy and critical public health roles. The uncertainties associated with the pandemic have caused significant limitations on recycling and municipal waste services. Meanwhile, the likely decrease in plastic waste generation—due to the global decline in economic activity, no collection and transportation or reduced collection rates and programs where inventory may not make it into the waste and recycling system until post-pandemic—has been significantly muted by the needs associated with the pandemic. As a result, more recyclables are being disposed of in the traditional waste processes- landfill and incineration. The behavior is additionally supported by precipitous drop in oil prices that makes manufacturing of the recyclable commodities cheaper. This challenges the goals of sustainability but also displays the deficiencies of short-term and product-based solutions to the plastics waste issue while stressing the need for a systems-level approach.

The global demand for certain uses of plastics has increased due to the coronavirus. The polymers polypropylene, used in lifesaving medical equipment such as N-95 masks and in takeout food packaging, polyethylene used in protective suits, and PET in single-use plastic water bottles and medical face shields have all seen a rise in demand as the COVID-19 pandemic plays out. With restaurants shifting to take-out, consumers stockpiling groceries and bottled water, and the medical community rapidly turning over personal protective equipment (PPE), there has subsequently been an uptick in plastic waste, municipal solid waste from residences, and hazardous waste generated from healthcare facilities, including quarantine sites, that are infected with COVID-19. However, overall plastic waste generation has likely decreased.

Due to the uncertainties around the risks associated with the transmission of COVID-19 to frontline solid waste workers and the survivability of the coronavirus on various surfaces, many municipalities, airlines, and other corporations have responded by shuttering their collection and recycling programs and taking

protective measures on how solid waste is managed. In an industry already overwhelmed with challenges, materials that would normally find its way to recyclers are being channeled directly as solid waste to landfills and incinerators out of an abundance of caution.

Things will mature and solutions will evolve.

One important thought is on packaging. Packaging sizes will change.

It is generally accepted that the packaging industry needs to come up with more wide-ranging solutions to its many and varied sustainability challenges. But there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, as we’re all very aware. Gerald Rebitzer, Director Sustainability at global rigid, flexible and carton packaging producer Amcor, about the methods it proposes: has put forth a good concept of the Seven Pillars of Sustainability.

He said “From my experience talking to people from many different facets of the packaging supply chain, one thing I have become increasingly aware of is that, while everyone agrees that we need to be more sustainable as an industry and as a society, there is little agreement on what this actually *means*. Some advocate passionately for recyclable plastics within a circular economy while others favour compostables; some extol the benefits of glass, some metal, and so on.

But what if nobody is ‘right’? What if it’s more a case of recognizing the uniqueness of each scenario and finding the best solution within that context? This, it seems, is what Amcor’s seven pillars are attempting to address.

Our intent with focusing on seven sustainability options is to give brands a clear starting point for actions they might take to switch to more environmentally friendly packaging. We then work together with our customers to tailor a solution for their specific product and market.

“And options can of course be combined in order to produce the optimal packaging with a holistic life cycle perspective in mind – for example, a bio-based PE pouch made from sugar cane that is also recyclable and has a lower carbon footprint than the product’s previous packaging”.

PCR (post consumed recyclables)

Materials that have served their purpose (have been used by the consumer) and subsequently been recycled to produce a new product.

Bio based materials

Materials derived from renewable resources such as corn, sugar cane or trees.

Responsible sourced materials

Raw materials sourced from socially and environmentally responsible suppliers, as confirmed by certification agencies.

Lower carbon footprint

Packaging that has a lower life cycle carbon footprint than common alternatives, e.g. due to material selection, design or improved recycling performance.

Recyclable

Packaging that meets accepted design standards for recyclability, i.e. packaging with the right attributes for successful collection, sorting, and recycling in the real world.

Compostable

Materials that biodegrade in a commercially managed or home composting system according to the relevant industry standards.

Reusable

Packaging that is refilled or used again for its original purpose.



Figure 1

A change is certain, the way we think, act, behave and do, a balance with all the stake holders, embracing the circular economy, all will be changed as we shift from obstacles to opportunities

Conclusion

Not to ban completely but to plan the use of plastic, recycling, and use of plastics in a judicious manner, not littering, creating a circular economy of the plastics, so that after its use it is not thrown out of the system and using alternative feedstocks to plastics, compostable plastics is the way ahead for a better planet.