

## Get the Facts on Sustainable Packaging

Lori Brown

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At the sixth annual Sustainable Packaging Forum held in Phoenix, the packed conference hall and impressive attendee and speaker lists made one thing certain: sustainability in packaging is a cross-industry topic.

Whether by mandate or through internal sustainability initiatives, companies are showing interest and innovation in decreasing the social and environmental impacts of packaging in the supply chain.

After two days of presentations and chatting with industry professionals, Earth911.com found some noteworthy standouts and buzz-worthy trends.

### **Eco-labeling**

With hundreds of different eco-labels popping up on consumer products, it's no surprise they continue to be the subject of conversation for packaging professionals and sustainability experts.

And as Ian Hanna, director of Development for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), iterated in his talk about eco-labeling, packaging is what consumers see first and



Featured at the Sustainable Packaging Forum Expo, EcoCradle products caught the eyes of many in the room. Used as alternatives to traditional packaging materials, the packaging is made of agricultural byproducts such as seed husks and combined with mushroom roots as a binding agent. Photo: Lori Brown, Earth911.com

can, therefore, be a valuable tool to product manufacturers.

This month, Earth911.com asked its readers, "How do you learn about whether or not a product is green?"

A whopping 67 percent of respondents indicated they read information on the package to determine whether or not a product is green.

Eco-labels are essentially consumer-facing logos on a product's packaging that claim an added environmental or social benefit. From labels certifying green restaurant practices to those certifying cosmetics free of animal testing, eco-labels can be tremendous marketing tools.

However, there is concern about unsubstantiated claims and that the baker's dozen of new labels that enter the market each year weakens the field of credible labels and creates consumer confusion. As a result, many in the industry are looking for increased transparency and harmonization.

For now, consumers can increase their purchasing power by educating themselves on labels and claims made on packaging. [EcolabelIndex.com](http://EcolabelIndex.com), the largest global database of eco-labels, aims to help consumers sort through nearly 340 eco-labels in 211 countries for 40 different industry sectors by providing information and transparency.

### **Making green claims on packaging**

Credible third-party verified eco-labels make viable green claims on packaging (emphasis on the words "credible" and "third-party verified"), providing consumers an educational component about the product they intend to purchase, increasing the consumer's purchasing power. Other green claims made on packaging are less than credible, with generic phrases like "this product fights global warming."

TerraChoice, a large environmental marketing firm, released its 2009 report, "[The Seven Sins of Greenwashing: Environmental Claims in Consumer Markets](#)," a follow-up to its 2007 report, which highlighted six "sins."

After finding a total of 2,219 products found in 24 'big box' stores, making 4,996 green claims in the U.S. and Canada alone, a seventh sin was added: Sin of Worshiping False Labels.

But legitimate eco-labeling is on the rise. According to the TerraChoice report, 23 percent of products researched carry a legitimate label, compared to 14 percent in 2007.

The Federal Trade Commission is on track to release an updated set of [Green Guides](#) this fall, used to guide enforcement of environmental claims. The guides are expected to tighten standards for packaging claims, including terms such as "recyclable" or "biodegradable." The Guides were released in 1992 and last updated in 1998.

### **The role of retailers in sustainable packaging**



Anne Bedarf of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition, Sara Hartwell of the U.S. EPA, Scott Mouw of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources and Tom Wright of Whole Foods Market answer questions following their presentations. Photo: Lori Brown, Earth911.com

At least two major retailers have released packaging guidelines, or scorecards, for their suppliers to follow. They are, in essence, changing the game for consumer goods suppliers.

No longer waiting for companies to make the changes through their own internal initiatives, the retailers are exercising their power of saying, "Meet these packaging requirements or find some new shelves for your products to sit on."

Walmart implemented the first store-wide packaging scorecard a couple years ago, evaluating metrics on the overall environmental impacts of packaging in the supply chain.

From recycled content to cube utilization and product transportation, measurable metrics contribute to a supplier's score, which can affect their standing with the retail giant.

Whole Foods Market is another retailer to use its buying power to influence packaging guidelines, with its recent announcement of new requirements for more than 2,100 body care and supplement suppliers.

The guidelines mandate that suppliers "reduce the use of plastic in product packaging, encourage the switch to glass when possible, limit acceptable packaging materials to those that are easily reused or recycled, and/or feature the highest percentage of post-consumer recycled content."

Suppliers were given one year to make the packaging adjustments, with all new suppliers required to meet the guidelines before their products can be sold in any of the 300 locations in the U.S., Canada and the U.K.

Whole Foods also recently [mandated](#) that all personal care products sold in their stores making "organic" claims must be third-party certified by the [USDA Natural Organic Program](#) standard of at least 95 percent certified organic products.

## **Transportation**

Sustainability in packaging is larger than a single prong on the supply chain ladder. One small change to a product's design can affect a string of events, from the amount of raw materials sourced to the greenhouse gas emissions produced during manufacturing.

One of the strongest factors in the realm of sustainable packaging is transportation. The forum featured presentations from the Manager of Sustainability Solutions for UPS, Arnold Barlow, as well as the Chair of the International Safe Transit Association, Joan Pierce, both speaking to the relationship between packaging and transportation.

"At UPS, we believe the single most sustainable thing you can do with regards to packaging is prevent damage," Barlow said during the forum's first session titled "Brand Owner Sustainability Perspectives." Damage yields double packaging, increases waste production and utilizes employee time.

When Cisco began a pilot program for "smarter" packaging last year, it was clear that small changes produce big results. As reported in [GreenBiz.com](#), one product line's packaging reduction of 33 percent increased transportation load utilization by 50 percent, resulting in \$1.3 million in annual savings.

Because Cisco supports global manufacturing and a global customer base, with much of the product shipped at some part of its journey, transportation costs are

an enormous contributor to company expenses. The most dramatic improvement for a product during the pilot was a 450 percent increase in transportation efficiency, representing a savings of \$1.8 million.