

Balancing food safety with packaging sustainability

The tension between food safety in packaging on the one hand, and environmental protection on the other, is a longstanding dilemma that has been brought into sharper focus by Covid-19. This conflict was unpacked in Tetra Pak's global research *Tetra Pak Index 2020: Covid-19 and the Food Safety-Sustainability Dilemma* undertaken in partnership with Ipsos.



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Tetra Pak's research recorded 53% of respondents listing food safety as the top issue compared to 52% listing more sustainable packaging as their top issue. Ultimately, the research illustrated there was no conflict but rather an interdependence between the two issues – 'What's good for the consumer has to be good for the planet as well'.

Food safety requires more packaging that also provides fully transparent health and nutritional data, which simultaneously permits food to last longer so as to improve food security. Finally, the packaging must be such that it doesn't damage the environment.

"This dilemma grows ever more acute as more people on the planet demand more and safer food. Consequently, this tension will only resolve through packaging innovations towards greater sustainability. The package of the future will play a central role in preserving both food and the environment," says Stefan Fageräng, managing director of Tetra Pak South Africa.



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Unique needs of developing countries

Yet a third factor is raised by developing countries such as South Africa where only a small percentage of consumers share these First-World concerns as their primary motivation.

Among affluent consumers, clearly marked expiry dates, and clean undamaged packaging give confidence in the safety and hygiene of the food. Tetra Pak Index's market research found that 58% of respondents reported that the outer packaging played a big role in their perceptions of food safety.

But the majority of South African consumers are less worried about such food safety issues as they are about food security – simply having enough food to eat by stretching their rand as far as they can.

Packaging has to be slightly different in this market – the primary concern being packaging which enables the food to be stored as long as possible, given that on average, many lower-income consumers struggle to stretch their salary and millions of South Africans are battling to make ends meet.



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“Consequently, numerous consumers want long-life packaging which is easy to carry and store, while retaining sufficient nutrition and Tetra Pak has identified the South African market as one in which it has to simultaneously address food safety and food security,” says Francesco Francione, market insights manager for Tetra Pak for Central Europe based in Italy.

“While food safety has always been a top concern, Covid-19 has driven the factor even higher in global concern ratings over the past year. Simultaneously, fears regarding climate change have increased considerably during this time. So, food packaging has to address three concerns in South Africa: long-lasting food; safe food; and environmentally sustainable packaging made from plants,” says Francione.

Packaging's impact on climate change

The Index found that 67% of respondents (across nine markets) say urgent action is required to reduce the impact of packaging on climate change. This pressure will force companies such as Tetra Pak to step up on a number of fronts:

- Sustainable packaging – 70% of respondents say packaging made from plant-based material would be preferable to them. This represents a growing public voice that is demanding a quicker shift to zero emissions, within a decade or so. As part of this trend, consumers have become willing to actively avoid certain products solely because consumers feel they don't meet their environmental expectations. For instance, 57% of consumers say they would avoid a product for excessive packaging.
- When it comes to recycling, 80% of respondents say companies should be obliged to assist with recycling the packaging they produce
- Food waste is another issue arising from the Index, which is raised by 77% of respondents as requiring some urgency.

"When consumers talk today of more sustainable packaging I suspect that they are talking about more than recycling. The public has an interest in understanding how the package protects the food, also reducing food waste, as there is a clear correlation between longer-life food packaging and reducing food waste. Radically reducing food waste is an imperative, as climate change may well make the growing of food more problematic," says Francione.



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He adds, "As an example, at the outset of the pandemic, crops ripening on fields were left to rot. There will undoubtedly be further examples of the impact of climate change on food waste which we cannot yet imagine. As a result, many companies such as Tetra Pak are setting targets for reduction of food waste.

"Consumers are increasingly aware not only of the economic impact of food waste, but its environmental impact – food waste alone is responsible for 8% of global carbon emissions, and this was aggravated by Covid-19. According to the Index, 47% of respondents believe that food waste is an area where they can personally make a positive difference, on top of what food companies can achieve."

"This research is an invaluable aide in terms of insights into the food carton of the future," concludes Francione.

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