



Published By: Origin Pharma Packaging

Creator: Rich Quelch – Head of Global Marketing

Document: Article: Blue Ocean Strategy | Analysing, Understanding and actioning a Sustainable Packaging Strategy

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It's very easy to go about your day to day life without thinking about the impact the products you buy and use have on the environment. Although there has been a surge in interest in single-use plastics, the reality is that many of us aren't aware of the damage we're doing to the planet. Every day, we use items and dispose of packaging, which may well be made from unsustainable resources and could end up in the ocean. Packaging is a problem, so what can we do about it? Pharmaceutical companies are participating in a wider effort to minimise waste, invest in sustainability, and develop new materials, which are more environmentally-friendly. This guide will provide information about the risks posed by packaging and details about how companies are changing the way they work to protect the environment.

Packaging and the environment

We come across a variety of packaged products every single day. From cartons used to contain milk and cereals, to medicine bottles, drinks bottles, food containers and packaging wrapped around clothing, we're exposed to all kinds of different materials on a daily basis. Today, more and more of us are taking an interest in how our lifestyles and the products we consume impact the environment. Recently, there has been a noticeable shift in attitude towards single-use plastic, largely due to the popularity of David Attenborough's Blue Planet documentaries. Heart-breaking images of turtles trapped in plastic netting and whales trying to eat plastic containers made us all stop and think about what we're doing, and how we can make changes. The Blue Planet series drew attention to ocean pollution, a problem many of us may not have been aware of before viewing the BBC footage. It's well-documented that plastic can't just disintegrate into the ether, but perhaps we were naive about how much ends up in seas and oceans. It's virtually impossible to put an exact number on the amount of plastic that ends up in the water every year, but scientists estimate that the figure tops 8 million metric tons. This equates to around 10 percent of the total amount of plastic we produce.

It's clear to see that packaging, most notably, single-use plastic packaging, is a problem, but why is it so detrimental to the environment? Plastic harms the ocean environment, but it also has an adverse effect on wildlife. Research conducted by the Ocean Conservancy shows that plastic traces were identified in 100% of turtle species and 60% of seabird species.

What are pharma companies doing to protect the environment?

Pharmaceutical companies are leading the way in adapting the way they work to benefit the environment and reduce the risk of harming the planet and its native wildlife species. There are numerous ways in which pharma firms are making an effort to protect and preserve the planet.

Focusing on sustainability

Investing in sustainability is a positive step forward for pharmaceutical companies in terms of waste reduction and lowering the detrimental impact of certain materials. Companies that are actively looking for sustainable ways of producing packaging are turning their attention to developing materials that are either reusable or recyclable, reducing the amount of packaging required, encouraging consumers to use packaging more than once and limiting the amount of waste produced throughout the supply chain. Consider the impact of buying and using a cup or flask made from sustainable materials compared to buying a bottle of

water every day. This is the kind of model pharma companies are working on. By utilising materials that can be used again and again, this eliminates the need for single-use plastic, contributing to significant waste reduction. It also lowers the risk of medicine bottles, tablet pouches and bottle tops ending up in our oceans. Using sustainable materials enables firms to develop and sell products contained within eco-friendly packaging. If you think that over 40 percent of adults in the UK take prescription medication, and this doesn't include items that you can buy over the counter, there's huge scope to make a difference in this industry.

Developing new, more eco-friendly packaging materials

For many years, the same materials have been used to create both external and primary packaging. Now, as pharmaceutical companies strive to do their bit to protect the environment, many are focusing on developing new, more eco-friendly packaging materials. Firms are looking for sustainable materials, but they're also sourcing and researching materials that have a much less harmful impact on the planet. Examples of materials that are now used by pharma businesses include:

- PE or PET: this is a material made from sugarcane. The process involves extracting ethanol from sugarcane and dehydrating it to create ethylene. The ethylene is then converted into PE or PET at a polymerisation plant.
- PCR (post consumer regrind): PCR products are made using plastic that has already been recycled. The theory lies in the fact that recycling more plastic reduces the demand for new plastic.
- PLA (polylactic acid): PLA is made from renewable materials, including corn starch.
- Biodegradable materials: one of the main issues with plastic is that it takes hundreds of years to break down. As a result, identifying biodegradable alternatives is likely to make a huge difference. The aim is to replace traditional plastics with biodegradable materials that do the same job, but decompose much faster.

Developing eco-friendly materials is not the only means of reducing plastic waste. Pharma firms are also researching and working on design and manufacturing processes that are cleaner and more environmentally-friendly.

The benefits of using sustainable packaging

Using sustainable packaging offers mutual benefits for businesses and customers. It is evident that people are concerned about the environment, and as a business owner or leader, it's important to respond. Changing the way you work could enhance your brand reputation, and encourage customers to choose your business over others as a result of the work you're doing to protect the environment and promote greener living. As well as creating a positive impression, switching to sustainable resources could also reduce costs, as smaller quantities of materials will be required to produce packaging. Many companies have also started to clamp down on unnecessary packaging. If you send out products with excessive packaging, you may find that going green saves you a substantial amount of money.

Reducing the carbon footprint

The carbon footprint is a measurement of emissions, which is produced both indirectly and directly by a single person, a household, a business, a country or an event. If you have a point of origin, a mode of transport and a destination, you can work out your carbon footprint when transporting a batch of products, for example. Pharmaceutical companies can reduce their carbon footprint by streamlining supply chain processes, improving energy efficiency and investing in advancements, which lower energy usage. There are also options such as

using eco-friendly vehicles to transport goods and encouraging employees to participate in green commuting schemes.

Other industries looking to make a difference

Changes are afoot in the world of pharmaceuticals, as more and more companies look to adopt eco-friendly ways of producing, distributing and selling products, but this is not the only industry hoping to make a difference.

The food industry is one of the leading producers of plastic waste. You only have to take a look around you in supermarkets or convenience stores to see that the vast majority of edible products are packaged using plastic. Despite the fact that many items are recyclable, the vast majority end up in landfill sites. It is estimated that more than 50 billion bottles of water are purchased each year, and only 20 percent are recycled. Food packaging firms and manufacturers are making an effort to reduce waste by using less plastic and reducing the size of cartons and containers, and they're also looking to use alternative materials, including graphene. Most of us will also have noticed that shops have stopped giving out free plastic bags. According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the number of plastic bags provided by England's seven leading supermarkets dropped from over 7 billion per year to 500 million in the first six-month period following the introduction of the 5p bag charge.

The fashion industry is also addressing the problem, with many brands signing up to initiatives that are designed to target microplastics, including switching to recycled materials such as plastic, polyester, and polyamide.

There's no doubt that many of us have more become more conscious of the environmental impact of our day to day lives. Jaw-dropping images featured in Blue Planet II provoked a national response, and even David Attenborough admitted that he had been bowled over with the scale and conviction of the reaction. Businesses can benefit from growing consumer interest in eco-friendly products and packaging. By investing in sustainable materials, reducing waste and adopting greener ways of working, companies aren't just doing their bit for the planet and cutting costs. They're also endearing themselves to consumers who want to make a concerted effort to switch to a more eco-friendly lifestyle. For pharma companies, alternative therapists and health professionals looking to make a difference, working to protect the environment makes perfect sense.