



SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING

The essential guide for ecommerce retailers

KUDOS GIFTWRAP
LUXURY GIFT PACKAGING

Sustainable Packaging: The Complete Guide

Packaging is vital in all areas of retail and has an especially important role to play in Ecommerce. At once a communication channel, a health and safety enabler, and a vehicle for brand identity, packaging decisions are some of the most crucial that an organisation can make. However, the downsides of packaging are well-publicised, leading to the United Nations declaring unsustainable packaging “a planetary crisis”.

Unsurprisingly, neither businesses nor consumers want this on their conscience, which is why sustainable packaging is becoming one of the most important areas of innovation and investment. This guide, which has been written for retailers and ecommerce providers, offers comprehensive insight into optimising packaging sustainability.

What is Sustainable Packaging?

Think about sustainability, and you're likely to be picturing the so-called 3 R's: reduce, reuse, and recycle. Consumers and companies are well-versed in this strategy, which is supported by infrastructure such as universal labelling and recycling refuse collections. However, truly sustainable packaging is much more involved than simply ensuring that materials have a green lifecycle. For instance, it involves aiming for carbon neutrality in all areas of packaging development and use throughout the supply chain as a whole. As such, it is a question of interconnected responsibility.



Which materials are the most sustainable?

With Forbes declaring 2021 “the year of packaging”, it is no surprise there is an increasing choice of materials available to retailers. From hemp to bio-plastics, here are some of the innovative solutions:

Paper and cardboard

Paper and cardboard are the most established sustainable packaging solutions, with high-profile companies such as H&M and Marks and Spencer swapping their plastic packaging for paper alternatives. However, paper and cardboard have some drawbacks. For instance, the carbon footprint of paper packaging is up to three times higher than plastics, which is in part due to the fact that its greater weight demands more fuel to transport. Additionally, the positive impact of paper and cardboard rely upon consumers and local authorities to do their bit at the recycling end, which carries high levels of risk. As such, it is crucial to work with a design expert when opting for paper or cardboard, as success depends upon excellent labelling to encourage consumers to play their part.



Organic options

With up to 66% of households expressing confusion over what can and cannot be recycled, packaging often ends up in landfill. For this, organic packaging may be the answer. Recent innovations include corn starch, hemp, seaweed, and – perhaps most promisingly – mushrooms. Mushrooms are a particularly interesting development because the packaging is not only fully biodegradable, but the decaying process can also help to break down other hard-to-shift compounds within landfill sites. Additionally, like seaweed, production requires minimal energy, occurs rapidly, and incurs very low costs.

Furthermore, this type of packaging is self-sustaining because, once established, a single fungi or seaweed 'starter' can grow indefinitely, providing an endless source of raw materials. These types of packaging are innovative, and are therefore currently more expensive. However, green-thinking companies such as IKEA are already embracing the power of mycelium by switching to mushroom-based packaging, and industry reports suggest that this particular market is expected to flourish rapidly.



Package cushioning

Traditionally achieved by using polystyrene loose fill, so-called packaging peanuts are a major contributor to pollution, with a truckload of plastic entering the oceans every minute. Worryingly, it is only possible to estimate how long polystyrene takes to biodegrade, with the majority of researchers agreeing that 500 years is a reasonable figure. As such, biodegradable air peanuts and biodegradable air cushions are a much more sustainable option. Biodegradable loose fills are made from natural starches derived from wheat and other cereals and are designed to dissolve in water within hours or days, Researchers have tipped them to be the product of the future.

There are inevitable drawbacks to using starch-based products, as production requires large areas of land and significant volumes of water. However, the benefit of biodegradable peanuts is that they can be safely disposed of anywhere, and in any manner, without releasing any toxins, residues, or microplastics into the environment. As such, high-profile brands such as ASOS, Calvin Klein, Kellogg, and Graze have already made the switch, to widespread consumer applause.

Can consumers tell the difference?

Currently, sustainability sells, so the majority of brands want consumers to know that their packaging is ecologically thoughtful. As such, it is normal for sustainable items such as air peanuts to be coloured green to distinguish them from their white, polystyrene counterparts. Equally, brands that opt for cardboard packaging often choose to leave it unbleached in order to make the sustainability message loud and clear. As is well attested, packaging is a crucial element of brand identity, so if sustainability is part of the vision, it can be easily communicated by using thoughtful ecological design. In other words, it isn't enough for packaging to be sustainable. It also has to look sustainable in the eyes of the consumer. Sustainable packaging can be produced to a vast array of textures and quality grades, so the communication of brand identity remains at the forefront, regardless of the choice of packaging material.



How and When can Brands meet their CSR Responsibilities?

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a blanket term covering any social investment and voluntary community work undertaken by a company, has a direct bearing on the types of packaging materials used. CSR strategies – commonly adopted by large brands and increasingly by smaller businesses, too – consider the long-term impacts of organisational

choices on society, and are measured in four main areas: philanthropic, ethical, economic, and legal. Ideally, socially responsible packaging will consider each of these areas.

Environmental sustainability

The choice of packaging material and its relation to the 3 R's is important, but so too is the entire production cycle. The most sustainable packaging options generate minimal emissions at all phases of their journey, from the field to the factory. For instance, 'sustainable' starch-based solutions can demand high water output and high fuel output, to considerable environmental cost. As a cradle-to-cradle solution, mushrooms are tipped to become the gold standard in so-called up-cycling, where waste materials from industries such as agriculture become raw materials for mycelium farming. In all potential Life Cycle Analyses (LCAs), sustainable options are more environmentally friendly than their plastic counterparts.



Using local resources

Shopping local can make a significant difference to corporate social responsibility. At an economic level, it helps to sustain the local community by providing much-needed jobs and providing organisations with the investment they need to create sustainable solutions. At an environmental level, using nearby resources can reduce fuel emissions, helping lower the carbon footprint of packaging whilst playing an important role in the construction of circular economies. According to the EU's environmental management scheme, local resources are therefore at the forefront of resource protectionism

ISO 14000

ISO 14000 is the formal name for the International Organization for Standardisation's Environmental Management Scheme. A set of tools, standards, and regulations aimed at helping companies to improve their sustainability, an ISO 14000 certification indicates that organisations are pursuing environmentally-friendly objectives. The standards are particularly focused on improving product lifecycles, as well as enhancing facilities so that they are more energy efficient, less wasteful, and less polluting. As such, opting to partner with suppliers who take their ISO 14000 responsibilities seriously can be as beneficial to sustainability as achieving the certification individually.

Optimising ISO 14000

There are several aspects to implementing ISO 14000 principles in your business. For example, industry analysts state that FMCG companies "will require much closer collaboration with upstream players, packaging converters, and recyclers" to achieve complete packaging sustainability. In other words, working with a responsible packaging provider is key. For instance, partnering with printers that adopt green technologies such as UV drying, and water-soluble inks can have a significant reducing impact on emissions and toxic waste. Therefore, for the highest sustainability potential, ISO 14000 standards should be considered at every point of the packaging lifecycle.



Positive influence

CSR and sustainability strategies can be highly influential for retailers keen to build a strong brand identity with consumers and develop a 'green' USP. Paying attention to environmental and social good practices has been shown to gain customer trust, whilst raising global awareness about issues such as hunger, plastic pollution, and global warming, which the research has shown is particularly attractive to millennial and Generation Z consumers.

Large organisations that are using packaging to improve their green credentials include Coca-Cola, whose 'World Without Waste' mantra is seeing it replace all of its plastic packaging with biodegradable alternatives. Lego is another high-profile brand that conceptualises the elimination of single-use packaging as a core element of its 'modern-day superbrand' identity. When major companies lead the change, alternative packaging becomes the norm, and competitors have no option but to follow.

What are the Benefits and Drawbacks of Sustainable Packaging?

It's all very well for mega-giants like Coca-Cola and Lego to invest in sustainable packaging, but for many high-street retailers and independent ecommerce businesses, the option may seem daunting. With so many choices available, and with much yet to be learned about the required infrastructure, weighing up the pros and cons is important. Here are the main take-aways:

The financial cost

The popularity of plastic is based purely on its low cost. It is cheap to make and cheap to transport, and is credited with making mass consumerism possible for buyers and sellers alike. The majority of logistics calculations work on the principle of shipping plastics, and the majority of business models and accompanying stakeholder agreements use plastic as a financial benchmark. Organisations wishing to move towards more sustainable solutions therefore need to be able to justify the cost.

However, making sustainable packaging cost-effective is increasingly accessible. According to a comprehensive [literature review](#) of nearly 50 high-impact studies, the key to success is a "proactive and integrated supply chain", something that technological developments are enabling. In addition, much of the financial cost is compensated for by the positive brand image that sustainable packaging and positive social investment generates, which often leads to [increased profitability](#). Today's solutions also focus on combining sustainable packaging with [weight and material usage improvements](#) to lower costs.

Quality

As is normal during major industrial shifts, there are lingering doubts regarding the quality of sustainable packaging. For instance, biodegradable plastics are often very thin, raising the risk of damage to goods in transit. To combat this, extremely strict standards such as [EN 13432](#) are now in place to ensure both quality and compliance in sustainable packaging. Additionally, there have been significant leaps forward in aspects such as aesthetics and tactility, both of which are crucial for [constructing brand identity](#). For retailers, this means [increased choice](#), [increased control](#), and [increased confidence](#) in their choice of packaging products. As such, today's sustainable solutions can offer extremely high-quality results.



How can I select the right Sustainable Packaging?

To start your journey towards improving your packaging sustainability, it is important to partner with a supplier that is already investing in this area. As we have read in this guide, the key to achieving real sustainability is about more than just switching from plastic to kelp starch. Instead, it is about focusing on every element of the packaging supply chain and ensuring that social and environmental responsibilities are met at all levels. Therefore, the ideal solution is to choose a packaging design partner, such as Kudos Giftwrap, that brings together brand communication, creative innovation, and environmental responsibility, and which is committed to on-going investment in sustainable solutions.

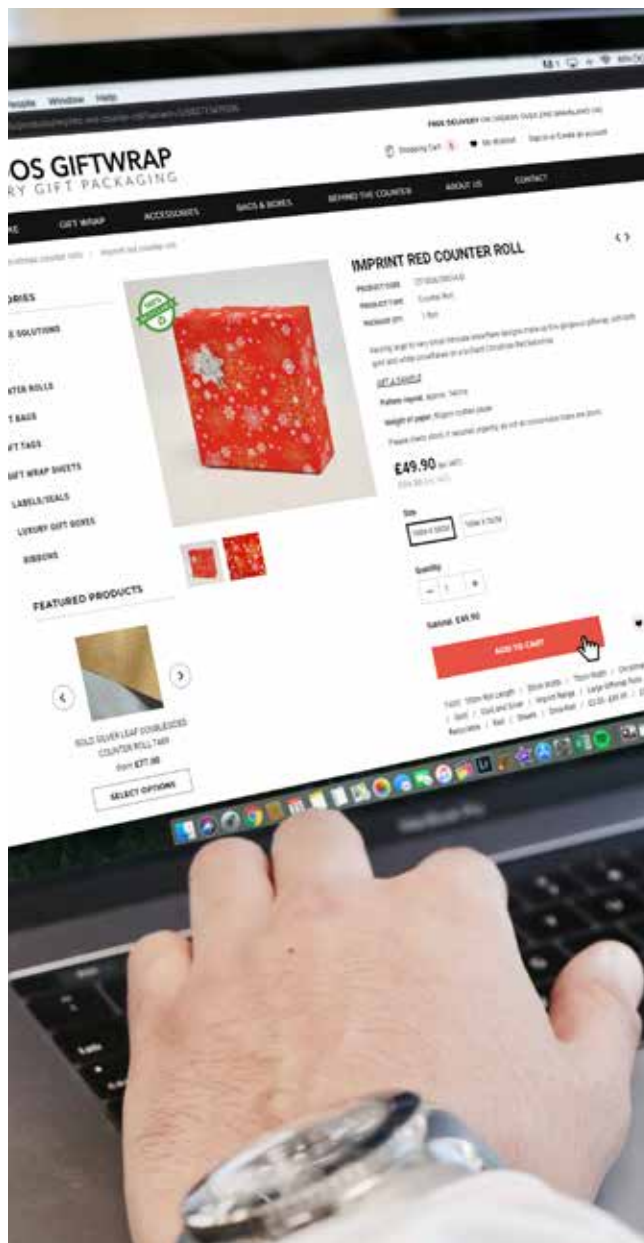
How can Kudos Giftwrap help?

As passionate players in the UK's e-commerce and high-street packaging market, the team at Kudos are positioned on the front line of sustainable packaging development. Our primary commitment is to supply-chain responsibility, as well as investing in creative, quality-enhancing, efficient branding solutions for retailers in all sectors.

For more information about how to embrace the packaging revolution, improve your sustainability profile, and engage with new markets, please get in touch using the details below:

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**Helping online and traditional retailers to
create great customer experiences - that
will build a stronger business.**

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