

Meeting the Challenge

Packaging today faces the challenge of meeting complex consumer demands, while remaining environmentally responsible

Many of Canada's municipalities already have bylaws limiting the amount of garbage householders can set at the curb. The City of Toronto is considering a move that would see fees for waste collection removed from the property taxes and charged separately, again based on how much waste a household generates. These and other initiatives are designed as incentives to encourage householders to improve their current recycling efforts.

And there is room for improvement. The recovery rate for the City of Toronto's plastic bottles and tubs program, for example, is currently just 30 per cent. At the same time, however, international experience has shown that there will always be materials going to landfill, despite our best recycling efforts. Fortunately, packaging produced today is better at meeting the increasingly complex needs of consumers with more sophisticated design and functions.

The Evolving Consumer

Demographics and lifestyle are also changing packaging waste generation. Between 1961 and 2001, the average number of people per household in Canada decreased from 4.5 to 2.6. And according to European studies, smaller households mean increased packaging. These studies found that one- and two-person households generate approximately 50 to 55 per cent more packaging waste per person per year than do households of three people or more. In 2001, one- and two-person households accounted for almost 60 per cent of the total number of households in Canada.

These changing demographics, combined with a changing lifestyle that puts convenience in high demand, affect how food is packaged on the retail shelves. Working couples may just as likely choose a pre-cooked roast over a fresh cut of meat to speed things up at the dinner table. Similarly, the single-person household may opt for the smaller, pre-cooked, pre-packaged portion available on the store shelves. Either case involves significantly more packaging than the fresh cut option: the outer board sleeve with the bilingual cooking instructions and list of ingredients, the plastic vacuum seal film that covers the meat and delivers a longer shelf life, and the heat-resistant tray used to heat the

meat. All in all, about 86 g of packaging. By comparison, a larger, fresh roast uses only about 43 g of packaging.

Too Much Packaging?

Although industry is working hard to meet the changing needs of today's consumers, it's also putting energy and resources into the post-consumer phase of packaging. Only a few short years ago, plastic tubs and margarine containers were considered unrecyclable. Today, more than half of the country's population can recycle these items through curbside or depot programs. Similarly, almost half of Canadians have access to plastic bag recycling, with that number increasing daily as more and more retail stores launch at-store, take-back programs.

An important fact to consider about packaging is the role it plays in municipal waste reduction before the product even reaches the retail shelves. Take sweet corn, for example. If all the sweet corn currently sold in North America packaged as frozen produce were available as fresh corn on the cob with the husks and cobs attached, there would be almost one million extra tons of municipal waste generated per year. Instead, much of that waste bypasses the municipal waste stream altogether, with a lot of it ending up in animal feed products. Similarly, of the approximately 626 million chickens sold in Canada in 2005, plastic packaging helped reduce about half a million tons – or 80 per cent – of the waste (such as innards and feathers) involved in bringing this poultry to market. Again, a lot of that went into animal feed.

When viewed within this larger context, packaging does more than just deliver a product to market. So while Canadians undoubtedly need to do more to divert material from landfill, it's a responsibility that lies upon all of our shoulders. At the same time, industry should be proud of the benefits of packaging and the accomplishments made thus far.

Cathy Cirko is the director general of the Environment and Plastics Industry Council (www.plastics.ca/epic) of the Canadian Plastics Industry Association. She may be reached at: (905) 678-7405, ext. 234, or ccirko@cpia.ca