



sustainable
packaging alliance

Sustainable Packaging Alliance Round Table Series

Round Table Number 14 Summary Report

Consumer labelling and Recyclability

Friday, 12th October 2007

Background

One of the five goals of the National Packaging Covenant (NPC) is to ensure that consumers are “able to make informed decisions about consumption, use and disposal of product packaging”. More specifically, brand owners and packaging companies have a responsibility under the NPC and the Environmental Code of Practice for Packaging (ECoPP) to ensure that packaging is labelled correctly for recyclability.

The purpose of this Round Table was to discuss opportunities for better communication with consumers in order to inform their purchasing decisions and to increase the quantity and quality of packaging being recycled.

Participants contributed to discussions to gain a better understanding of:

- Problems with current environmental labelling practices in Australia;
- Barriers to increased recycling by householders; and
- Communication programs implemented by the packaging industry and other groups.



This report provides a summary of the presentations and discussions of the 14th SPA Round Table.

Communicating recyclability: the rationale and potential hazards

Helen Lewis (Sustainable Packaging Alliance) spoke about the need to engage consumers in recycling through better communication and labelling. Consumers have problems identifying whether or not items are recyclable. Labelling could be improved to help consumers make their recycling decisions and to reduce confusion about what can and cannot be recycled. Clear and specific information should be provided about how to recycle, for example, how to separate non-compatible materials. Consumers should be supported in their decision-making through the use of websites, phone information, etc. A standard, industry-wide labelling protocol could be introduced with clear information and support for consumers and packaging manufacturers. A voluntary code on recycling claims could also be integrated within ECoPP, advising what is recyclable, what logos should be used and instructions about how to recycle.

Diane Gibson (Sustainability Victoria) continued the discussion by looking at environmental labelling. Voluntary labels are successful when the consumer and suppliers acknowledge the value of the labels and utilise them in their decision-making processes. Labels need to be independent and claims verified by a third party. Privately run labels are seen to lack transparency and utilise undisclosed or weak evidence. Labelling schemes work best when used in combination with a range

of government and industry policies and practices such as industry codes of practice. The NPC and ECoPP could be used as a framework for environmental labelling. They contain scope for handling source reduction, potential for reuse, recovery and recycling, recycled content, minimising impacts and propensity to litter. A combined effort by manufacturers, brand owners and government is necessary to make decisions on what is required and how it should happen.

Consumer Awareness and barriers to recycling

Jasmine Hoye (Ipsos Australia) explained that her presentation was based on a series of social research studies undertaken by Ipsos. Environmental consciousness is increasing in Australia due to the effects of the drought and climate change and how these are highlighted in the media. The surveys found that the main reason people recycle is their desire to help the environment and recycling is ranked as the most popular household actions to help reduce greenhouse emissions. Although there are now more items being recycled, there is still confusion about what can and what cannot be recycled and greater clarity is required. This would not only assist in reducing contamination of the recycling stream, but also increase recycling rates. Information about how items should be recycled is often ambiguous is often not understood. It is important that there are strategies in place to target the many and varied barriers to recycling which currently exist. The use of “Climate Change” as a new parent brand, with “Recycling”, “Water” and “Energy”, becoming sub-brands, for marketing environmental responsibility could be considered. The use of this system places recycling alongside water and energy in importance for protecting the environment. This would provide an integrated approach for households to tackle climate change and global warming.

Panel presentations

Jenny Henty (Upstream Advice) stated that the role of labelling on packaging is to provide the consumer with information. This should include which bin should be used for disposal and how the packaging should be prepared for disposal. Information should be clear and readily understood. Jenny introduced a number of interesting points including: Displaying packaging information can show the ethical standards of a brand owner and indicate their commitment to the environment; Recyclable parts are often hard to separate from non-recyclable components or there is no information included on the packaging to tell them how to separate parts; The Australian standard states that an item is recyclable “if systems are available”, but it is often not apparent to a consumer if the systems are available in their area; and Biodegradable and degradable packaging is complex and can be misleading. “Compostable” may be a more appropriate word for some packaging.

Jacky Nordsvan (Nestlé Oceania) identified a number of challenges in communicating recyclability information. Gaps in the information currently used to determine recyclability include: the impact of some packaging types on the recovery stream; the environmental benefits of post consumer recycled content; and the impact of collecting the 4-7 plastics for recycling overseas. The importance of having easy-to-read labels cannot be underestimated. In addition to the size of the message, consumer confusion can be further minimised by the use of consistent visuals. The action required by the consumer should be clear from the instructions given. The consumer needs education about the differences between perception and reality. For example, there is still uncertainty about the environmental merits of plastic versus cardboard (cardboard is recyclable but may have higher environmental impacts than plastic).

Joel Leske (Coles) has been working to improve disposal information on Coles’ house brand products. He has found many issues with the current labels, including the number of different logos being used, which contribute to customer confusion. Inconsistent waste collection regimes across the country make labelling for recycling problematic. Different municipalities collect different materials with differing time periods between collections and different costs involved in collection or disposal of waste products. Environmental claims on packaging are governed by AS14021:2000. The conditions associated with these claims are numerous and cover a range of factors. Joel said

that it may be necessary to double the size of packaging in order to meet the requirements for labelling!

Peter Bury (Plastic and Chemical Industries Association) told the group that the plastics identification code classifies polymer types. Its use in Australia commenced in 1990. It is an effective, voluntary product stewardship program which allows organisations to make end of life decisions about products. Use of the code has simplified the collection, recovery and reprocessing of used plastics. PACIA reviewed and updated the code in 2001 as part of their commitment to the NPC. The code is used universally and provides the basis for discussion about packaging. Rather than being a marketing device, it is used to provide information. PACIA aims to keep plastics as plastics for as long as possible for maximum conservation of resources.

Nick Harford (Visy Recycling) commenced by saying that the role of consumer labelling was to make consumers more able to recycle. The concept of the environmental foot-print was too complex to communicate to the consumer. However, packaging does not contribute a substantial amount when looking at the entire waste stream. An Australian Food and Grocery Council study has shown that greenhouse gas production is quite low for packaging and energy inputs are not great. In spite of this, the packaging industry is also perceived as being bad (28% of people say that packaging is one of the 3 most harmful industries to the environment). People recycle as they feel that there is a benefit to the environment. They also want to reduce the amount of product being sent to landfill. There is a difference between items that are technically recyclable and actually recyclable. Items must be able to be recycled in existing systems. The market is ever-changing, with many collection systems, operated by many different companies. End markets are constantly fluctuating.



Panel Members (l-r): Jenny Henty, Peter Bury, Jack Nordsvan, Joel Leske, Nick Harford

Outcomes and learnings

There is currently a high level of commitment to recycling by the consumer. However, further work is required to move to the next level. There is a need to build trust into the current and future systems. Labelling is critical to help take the next step. Current labelling systems are frustrating and confusing. The NPC should give consumer labelling a higher priority with government taking the lead.

Sponsorship

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