Goodness of Deepfakes >PG.72

Ola's Ride to Electric Moolah >PG.44

Aviation on a SAFe Flight >PG.82

OUTLOOK BUSINESS

February 2024 | ₹100 | Subscription Copy Not For Resale | www.outlookbusiness.com

THINK BEYOND. STAY AHEAD.

RAW DEAL

How southern India is keeping the east poor in the GREAT INDIAN DIVIDE

Green Agenda 2024

Special Section

INTERVIEW

"UFlex is Committed to Achieving Carbon Neutrality by 2035"

Jeevaraj Gopal Pillai is an eminent leader in the packaging industry. A mechanical engineer with an MBA degree, Pillai has been associated with UFlex, a renowned packaging company, for the last 27 years. He has more than 34 years of industry experience, spanning various aspects of packaging technology from pre-press to high-end conversion to designing flexible packaging materials for circularity. In this interview with Saurabh Kumar, he emphasises the importance of building a circular packaging economy

JEEVARAJ GOPAL PILLAI
Director, Sustainability and President,
Flexible Packaging and New Product Development

UFlex is a pioneer in plastic circularity. How has the sustainable packaging ecosystem evolved in India and globally over the decades?

Sustainability is not just a talking point in packaging anymore, but it has become an essential part of the industry DNA. For years, the packaging industry has led innovation, developing more sustainable materials and technologies for effectively recycling difficult-to-recycle plastics.

How enabling are the policies and laws?

There are regulations in place in most countries to address the issue. In India, we are in the middle of implementing Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) based on a cardinal principle: every polluter must collect waste. This covers producers, importers, brand owners of plastic packaging material, and plastic waste processors.

This mechanism is centralised via a portal where inputs and outputs are balanced, similar to GST. It's an effective system that prevents potential tampering or deception. This well-designed EPR obligates all stakeholders to reuse, recycle, reduce the use of virgin material, and provide end-of-life to balance material. In India, we have gone beyond discussing the removal of plastic waste from the environment to defining mechanisms for addressing the collected waste and

outlining the associated obligations. It is also an economic model, which promotes the development of recycling infrastructure and rewards recyclers by awarding them tradable certificates. Being market-driven, it speeds up policy implementation.

Unlike Europe, we do not have a plastic tax, which aims to penalise the industry. Instead, we have created an API, enabling the industry to come together and address the entire issue instead of just collecting taxes. Many countries are considering implementing similar regulations. This will also be a key deliverable in the Global Plastic Pact being finalised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). These policies and legislations will be pivotal in addressing plastic waste pollution in India and worldwide.

You are also engaging with global initiatives like the Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW) to share good practices in circularity. What has been the response?

The alliance is a great organisation that has brought all stakeholders from different countries together, enabling a lot of technology exchange. For example, if Europe is excellent in collection systems but is lagging India in recycling expertise, especially when it comes to recycling difficult-to-recycle packaging waste, the alliance brings together both. In such situations, the exchange is mutually very beneficial. It's a useful platform, having representations from brand owners, polymer manufacturers, convertors, and plastic waste processors from across the globe. The alliance funds good projects, especially in countries like India, where funding is a constraint for building recycling or collection infrastructure. It has three roles: funding projects, technology exchange, and creating a database for enabling investments. Although UFlex is a relatively new player in AEPW compared to the other big members like ExxonMobil, Dow Chemicals, PepsiCo, etc., it has created an impact by demonstrating recycling technology for difficult-to-recycle materials for developed economies and companies on this platform.

What are the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) targets for UFlex this year?

We are dedicated to creating long-term value for all our stakeholders. Our ESG goals are dynamic as they are a part of our continuous improvement commitment. This year, our primary focus is reducing carbon emissions, and we have already implemented plans to assess our supply chain emissions. Additionally, we plan to be very active in the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) with Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) and Integrated Reporting (IR). We will continue to expand our recycling infrastructure by adding more recycling plants. In addition, we will continue to prioritise the well-being of our employees and enhance our community impact interventions. Also, we are enhancing our sustainability practices to exceed stakeholder expectations by engaging with consumers, employees, investors, and communities.

How is UFlex pursuing carbon neutrality?

UFlex is reducing its carbon emissions to meet its commitment to become carbon neutral by 2035 or earlier. We will continue to monitor and reduce our supply chain carbon emissions and direct and indirect emissions. We promote environmentally friendly processes, evaluate the effect of raw materials on the environment, and opt for lower-emission sourcing choices. We are aligning our SBTi targets with efforts to mitigate global warming and have initiated a strategy for carbon offsetting through community-based and biodiversity projects. This will support our CSR efforts and help reduce carbon emissions. To use less energy, we are funding several energy-saving initiatives and renewable energy projects.

Our immediate goals include a significant reduction in emissions, a double-digit decrease in total waste generated, and a higher increase in recycled or reused raw materials and inputs in our production processes. We also intend to participate in sustainability ratings, including the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and EcoVades.

The public perceives plastic as among the worst polluters despite flexible plastic packaging having the least emissions compared to aluminum, tin, glass, and paper packaging. Why is it so, and what can be done to dispel it?

Yes, this is true that plastic has the least carbon emissions compared to aluminum, tin, and paper. But the problem is recyclability. Aluminum cans and paper packaging have very high emissions but good recyclability. It is the opposite for plastics. It fares poorly on recyclability but well on carbon emissions. While it is important to address the negative "perception" about plastic packaging, it is imperative for the industry and government to work together to improve the recycling index of plastics.