



Food & Beverage Asia

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An alternative price for protein

Going overseas: A way out for Chinese plant-based meat brands?

How digitalisation and IoT can keep the production line moving

Photo courtesy of DSM



Redefining the future of plastic

Despite global efforts to reduce plastic in the ecosystem, plastic packaging still plays an important role in the packaging industry.

Agatha Wong speaks with Anantshree Chaturvedi, vice-chairman and CEO of Flex Films, to understand how companies can work towards developing a packaging model that uses plastic sustainably.

Plastic packaging still plays a huge part in the food and beverage industry.

Can you share with us your views on plastic food packaging, and do you see that changing any time soon?

Anantshree Chaturvedi: Packaging is deeply embedded in our lives and provides a solution to feed the planet, minimise food waste and deliver goods safely. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) suggests that to reduce food waste and loss, the solution is to use more but better packaging. Reproducing food that is wasted due to inadequate packaging may be more harmful to our planet than avoiding waste through suitable packaging.

However, plastic waste management is an ever-increasing area of focus globally. The slow recycling rates of plastic is turning consumers to others forms of packaging which have a larger carbon footprint. Although concerning, plastic packaging waste is in my view a solvable problem that requires a combination of solutions. The flexible plastic packaging industry is investing in new technologies, developing packaging formats that are made of post-consumer recycled (PCR) content and are designed for easier recycling, making biodegradable options, and partnering with brand-owners to increase closed-loop recycling programmes. Thus, instead of revolting against the use of plastic packaging, we must pour our efforts into making it more recyclable.

The change here is inevitable. The switch will either be a slow slide towards these alternate materials and formats or a sudden

change that will need to be done to de-link the global reliance on virgin polymers.

Can you elaborate more about sustainable plastic packaging, and how can plastic packaging be sustainable?

Chaturvedi: Sustainable plastic packaging encompasses all activities related to sourcing, creation, purpose and use of plastic packaging in a way that it does not harm the planet.

To make plastic packaging sustainable, we first need to understand the real challenge behind plastic waste generation, which arises out of the stock and flow of plastic waste. There is a stock of polymer that exists and once discarded, plastic packaging waste adds to the existing stock. Such waste includes plastic waste derived from discarded gadgets and appliances. To be a responsible, future-ready world, there is a need to have an ecosystem that collects plastic waste,

reprocesses, recycles or upcycles it, and uses the recycled content to make products of different forms.

Second comes the flow of polymer. New plastic is being made every day. This new form of plastic has to be made out of less or non-fossil fuel forms that are eco-friendly, like bioplastics and biodegradable plastic packaging.

The cycle is simple. Start with what you have in store and stock, and use that polymer more effectively. When you add more plastic flow to that heap, the redesigned polymer reduces the load of polymers on planet earth. Biodegradability is that solution.



What are the ways companies can incorporate sustainability practices even through using plastic in their packaging?

Chaturvedi: The answer to any company trying to attain sustainable plastic packaging lies in what methodologies it adopts to achieve a circular economy. While using recyclable packaging helps reduce a company's carbon footprint, it does not address the issue of plastic waste if that packaging post-consumption does not reach the appropriate recycling streams. It needs to be enabled with correct disposal and collection of packaging waste as well.

As one of the industry leaders in flexible packaging, we realise that while plastic packaging has its benefits, plastic waste has to be managed tactfully. At UFlex, we have our global sustainability initiative, Project Plastic Fix, where we deploy different methodologies to keep plastic in the economy yet out of the environment.

We recycle industrial and post-consumer multi-layer mixed plastic waste into granules that are further used to make new household and industrial plastic products including dustbins, outdoor furniture, and more. This ensures that flexible packaging waste exits the environment and enters back into people's lives with a practical purpose and prevents it from being a pollutant.

PET plastic bottle waste is converted into green plastic packaging film Asclepius, our range of SCS-certified BOPET film containing up to 100% PCR content displaying the same attributes and application as any standard fossil fuel-based twin substrate. This method creates an endless loop of polymer that is reused to make a new product like a pouch or label each time. We have extended this methodology now to also upcycle PE-structure based post-consumer packaging waste into PCR polyethylene films. Multi-layer plastic waste is reprocessed into forms of energy with zero greenhouse emissions, employing an anaerobic system. What might have been incinerated is instead used to produce energy into liquid fuel, hydrocarbon gas and carbon black.

To address the issue of uncollected plastic waste, our under-trial biodegradable packaging solution returns plastic waste to earth in the form of biomass, which is nothing short of fertiliser in the natural environment.

UFlex has also been creating laminates that use less virgin plastic at the source like our range of eco-friendly paper-based tubes Kraftika. We also practice zero discharge of industrial waste and recycle much more than our production waste by collaborating with our clients and suppliers to procure their plastic waste.

How can adopting sustainable plastic packaging make a successful business case for food companies, especially those small- and medium-sized?

Chaturvedi: Adopting sustainable plastic packaging makes for a brilliant case for food companies, big or small. When it comes to food handling and shelf life, plastic packaging still meets those needs better than other packaging materials. Packaging players are already developing more and more food-grade applications with higher sustainable value.

I am also noticing that sustainable packaging for food-related products will certainly be the top priority and end-users will wish to see more recyclable or compostable plastics films.

Such trends offer a big opportunity for food and beverage companies to target the market with sustainable plastic packaging formats. Brands must study their focused market and act sooner than later. Also, clear communication around sustainability narratives for both product and packaging must be ensured.

Though sustainable plastic packaging can be more expensive initially, thus adding to the financial cost of small-time players, studies show consumers will pay more for products from brands committed to environmentally friendly practices. Moreover, the long-term benefits outrun the increased cost burden to procure sustainable plastic packaging as it propels consumer loyalty.

With upcycling and recycling efforts on the rise, do you anticipate this becoming a norm across the food and beverage industry, especially in Asia?

Chaturvedi: I believe so. In the face of brands and consumers becoming increasingly conscious about their plastic consumption and footprint in the environment and new, stricter sustainability regulations emerging on multiple fronts including the imposition of higher taxes and penalties, I'm certain recycling and upcycling of plastic will escalate in the coming times across the world, including Asia.

Consumers in India, China and Indonesia have taken up the green cause strongly and seem to be willing to pay for sustainable plastic packaging choices. However, the implementation pace may vary across different countries of Asia where other environmental concerns like water pollution and air pollution take precedence over a plastic waste generation.

In Asia, to quicken the pace of growth in recycling, which is at the heart of the circular economy, investments in resilient infrastructure need to be made; and collaborations with local cities in Asia that cause plastic pollution are required to scale up collection and sorting of plastic material. **FBA**