

Plastic is green too

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OPINION

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The industrial revolution was a turning point in what we generally call ‘progress’. It heralded the start of automation, production lines, mass production, mass consumption, and also air, water and, generally, environmental pollution. More than two centuries of ‘contaminating’ at increasingly higher rates without being fully aware of it. Fortunately, these days business sustainability is not a fad, but an obligation for all industries to be more responsible, without compromising on progress or economic growth. And although it is true that most of us have been tirelessly striving to achieve this in recent years, there is still much left to do.

In the food industry, for example, there is an increasing trend—buoyed by consumer demand, which today is much more aware and responsible—of introducing ecological production methods, proximity distribution to avoid unnecessary emissions, ‘green’ marketing and efficient waste management. However, it is seldom taken into account that all the ancillary companies in the supply chain are also a crucial element on the journey to sustainability. Here is where the most obvious aspects comes into play: introducing greener transport, using clean fuels like electricity and reducing empty load journeys to boost energy efficiency; but other variables too, such as managing the load inside the vehicle, can make a difference, and so can the use of reusable packaging for transport.

Glass loves plastic

Food-grade glass, a sector that has been growing non-stop in the last decade and that has been unwaveringly committed to sustainability and the circular economy, is among those that foster the most initiatives, from inside and outside the industry, in connection with environmental responsibility. Here, we are referring to transport from glass factories to bottling plants and later to points of sale. This requires packaging systems for transport (such as layer pads and top-caps/top-frames) which have traditionally been made of cardboard or plastic. Which would you say is the most environmentally efficient? You might be surprised: the answer is reusable and recyclable plastic, which is, moreover, the most widely used and preferred material for this use at present.

Admittedly, plastic may have something of a 'bad name' in terms of sustainability, because most of the non-biodegradable waste that contaminates seas and rivers is currently made of plastic. That's why it is important that it be **recyclable** (using plastics that already exist and that we cannot effectively destroy), **reusable** (the more uses, the fewer production, destruction and recovery processes will be necessary) and, lastly, **repairable. The so-called three Rs**. Not only that, but efficiency also means safety and hygiene and, in the food industry (as well as pharmaceuticals and cosmetics), these are pivotal values—a plastic packaging system that does not leave trace particles of any kind and does not deteriorate or break easily. Plus, it can be cleaned and sanitised!

This is a clear model for the circular economy in which, factoring in the right cleaning, sanitising and recycling processes, when compared with single-use cardboard (these plastic layer pads can have more than twenty uses, over the course of an average useful life of seven years), we are actually reducing plastic use for the planet while optimising the efficiency of this material. Indeed, the carbon emissions of this kind of reusable packaging can be as much as 50.96% lower than those of cardboard, water consumption 78.8% lower and SO₂ emissions (acidification potential) 52.9% lower over the course of the layer pads' useful life.

Another sustainable factor is the operating model. If a product is reusable, do users really need to own it? This means adding to their business (and every business in the sector) an area for the collection, cleaning and relaunch into circulation of these materials in every rotation. So, 'let the cobbler should stick to his last'. If everyone does what they do best, the chain will be as strong as each of its links. Outsourcing is key and it is increasingly widespread in an industry like this.

We are the #GenerationRestoration, to quote the slogan for this year's UN World Environment Day, and as such it is our responsibility and obligation to manage our lives, our leisure and, especially, our businesses, in a more efficient and sustainable way. The time to pollute and leave mountains of uncontrollable and indestructible waste behind us is over; the time has come to recycle, reuse and repair. That applies to everything. And we must be responsible and aware in every step we take. Our future and that of our children depends on it.