

Packaging - the facts



Packaging protects

Packaging plays a valuable role in protecting goods. Packaging is what gets the pea from the farm onto your plate, the TV from the factory into your living room. Industry has an interest in keeping packaging to a minimum – to reduce costs as well as to comply with the packaging laws.

In praise of packaging

- Packaging protects – ten times more energy goes into the production of the food and goods it contains than into the packaging itself.
- Packaging makes modern lifestyles possible.
- When you buy an undamaged carton or tin in a shop, remember that the boxes and crates that carried them securely on lorries and in warehouses are as vital as the cartons and tins themselves in getting the product to you.
- The packaging industry continues to rise to the challenge of being responsible and innovative – glass containers are on average 30% lighter than in 1980, the weight of cans has fallen by a similar figure in the last twenty years and carrier bags are 45% lighter than in 1990.
- The industry has driven innovations such as anti-litter retained ring-pulls and readily open-able / re-sealable cartons.
- Industry continues to make packaging easier to use and more convenient for consumers, while providing better protection using less material and so generating less waste.
- As well as protecting and preserving goods, packaging carries vital information on ingredients, keeps hazardous products away from children, and ensures goods are safe (where packaging cannot be opened without showing evidence of tampering).
- Companies that produce and use packaging make a positive contribution to society both directly and through membership of INCPEN. For nearly 20 years, INCPEN has been running schools programmes. It supports the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign, and lends its backing to local authority recycling campaigns.

Making modern lifestyles possible

Many packaging innovations are a direct response to consumer demand:

- The growth in single-person households means demand for smaller, more convenient portions has grown.
- Similarly, as more women now work outside the home than 20 years ago, demand for food that is easier and quicker to prepare and cook, has risen.
- Convenience culture – half of us now claim to eat ‘on-the-go’ with no prior thought given as to where our next meal is coming from¹.

Putting packaging in perspective

- Packaging attracts a lot of media attention – disproportionately so given its relatively small environmental impact. For example, packaging uses only a fraction of the energy that is expended in driving a car. Just 3% of a household’s annual energy use is taken up by packaging.
- If you were to drive one less mile a day – or to turn your thermostat down by two degrees - you’d save as much energy as is used to make the packaging for an average household’s whole year’s supply of packaged goods.

Packaging legislation and guidance

- Under the European Packaging Directive, the industry has to meet strict requirements to prevent the use of excessive packaging.
- The INCPEN Responsible Packaging Code of Practice is widely used. Trade associations covering over 85% of businesses involved in the supply chain for packaged goods recommend the Code to their member companies. Trading Standards Officers up and down the country use the Code in their everyday compliance work with small and mid-sized businesses.

Footnotes

¹ Rexam – Busy Lives report, 2004.

² ENCAMS – Litter Composition Survey, October 2004.

Common myths

- **“Manufacturers use excessive packaging as a matter of course.”** Not so. If they did, there would be many fewer packaging companies in existence today – companies have a commercial interest in minimising packaging. As with any industry, there are occasional incidents of bad practice – and INCPEN has campaigned consistently for the introduction of a “packaging watchdog” to address such problems. What’s more, a report by the Institute of European Environmental Policy suggests that under-packaging can be much more of an issue than over-packaging, in terms of wasted energy and resources from ruined goods.
- **“Packaging is a major contributor to waste.”** It’s not. In fact, packaging waste is on average 20% by weight of the contents of your dustbin and when compressed in landfill packaging from all sources is less than 5% – by weight and volume – of total waste.
- **“Most litter is packaging.”** The facts don’t bear that out. While cigarettes and gum account for nearly 85% of litter, all packaging-related items combined make up 4%. Plastic carrier bags make up just 0.06%.²