



Common Sense Sustainability: A Better View of the Trenches

By **Dennis Salazar**

How green is green enough? ...and how committed does a company have to be in terms of dollars and cents to be a good eco-citizen? ...and can an environmentally conscious public raise their sustainable requirements so high that it becomes economically unfeasible for companies to even attempt to meet them?

Some may call it selling out, compromising, or even “sustainability lite,” but I believe in a realistic, common sense approach to sustainability. I am convinced sustainability in the packaging world will be best accomplished with what can be a very delicate, and at times uncomfortable, coexistence of determination and patience.

I believe we have to accept that while we move toward absolute standards and consistent definitions, today to a certain degree we live with “subjective sustainability,” in the sense that others’ ideas of what is sustainable or even eco-friendly may not be identical to our own. I also believe it is good and even wise to applaud the smallest steps as long as they are in the right direction. Ironically, it is really not much different than the way we cheer and celebrate a child’s first unsteady—but usually very enthusiastic—steps in life.

A taste for waste?

Whether we are talking about spoiled consumers or gluttonous companies, we are conditioned to feed to excess and to be the world’s greatest consumer of resources. None of us was tattooed at birth with “born to kill... the environment,” and I doubt anyone will ever prove that we suffer from a genetic predisposition for environ-

mental recklessness. Being incredibly wasteful does, however, appear to be a learned skill and we have all become darn good at it.

From a packaging perspective, the solution is really not all that difficult to understand: utilize better, more earth friendly materials (production); use less of those materials (application); and know how you are going to utilize or process them in the end (disposal).

When you cut through the details, biases, and opinions, that is really all it comes down to. Then why is sustainability proving to be such a difficult task? Is it because for a very, very long time, we have enjoyed tremendous prosperity that allowed us to have little regard for what we take out of our earth and even less care for what we put back into it in terms of waste?

How many environmentalists does it take to shift a paradigm?

It sounds like a terrific opening line for a late night TV joke but it is a legitimate question. I spoke to a friend of the cause earlier today and she referred to sustainability as not a movement but a dramatic, tremendous paradigm shift—and she is right. What we are asking consumers and companies to do is so far from what they have always done, we have to understand that this is going to take some time.

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For benefit of the impatient zealots out there. No, I am not talking about decades but let’s assume it may take a few years! Let’s also accept and understand that such a dramatic reversal in behavior is going to be painful for everyone concerned. It is going to be excruciating for those people going through the change, as well as for the ones impatiently observing their slow forward progress. All I can say is the obvious. The environment did not get into this awful condition overnight and the solution is probably going to take a little longer than any of us would like.

According to the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments movie, the Israelites who escaped from Pharaoh, after losing faith and behaving very badly, were forced to roam the desert until the sinful generation had died. Then and only then was the new, faithful generation allowed to enter the beloved Promised Land. Having crossed the magical threshold of 50 several years ago, I am definitely not suggesting accelerating the Baby Boomers’ departure. I am, however, suggesting a little common sense and understanding. Environmentally, we have all behaved very badly. But with a lot of hard work, and a little patience, this much needed cleansing process will hopefully not take a generation to accomplish. ■