

Home > News

March 17, 2020 12:51 PM | UPDATED 22 HOURS AGO

# Opinion: Plastics may be down, but are not out

## Ensuring the circularity of plastics - all plastics - is key to the future of the industry

RETAL / Sustainability Director Emmanuel Duffaut

RETAL / Sustainability Director Emmanuel Duffaut

TWEET SHARE IN SHARE EMAIL

PRINT



Sustainability is increasingly at the heart of brand development, regardless of industry or sector. Whether it's the CSR communication of a global business or the promise of a more responsible approach from a start-up, sustainability impacts us all.

And rightly so. We are all consumers as well as employees, we are parents, friends, children. We want to do the right thing wherever possible within our sphere of influence, from what we chose to spend our money on at lunchtime to where we go on holiday. One of the quickest, most satisfying ways to visually show how important sustainability is to us is in the products that we buy, particularly the products that other people will be aware that we've bought.

FMCG brands that use bio-based packaging are up year on year, with a recent study [1] stating that bio-based packaging was valued at USD4.65bn in 2019. Leading brands are keen to align themselves with the positive media of bio-based packaging, with smaller brands using it to connect with Millennials and differentiate themselves on crowded supermarket shelves [2].

For global plastic packaging producers, it could seem like their ship has sailed. Yet the very fact that there is difficult publicity surrounding traditional plastic packaging, particularly for primarily single-use applications found in the FMCG sector, means that responsible plastic packaging manufacturers are pushing themselves to be as innovative, supportive and progressive as possible.

Proud of plastic

For globally-active PET and rPET packaging manufacturer Retal, its employees are a driving force in keeping the successful company at the right side of single-use plastics. The company is certainly not against bio-based materials, but it is against greenwashing. The company's Sustainability director Emmanuel Duffaut actively researches the alternatives to plastic to ensure that green-washing isn't on the agenda. He says, "We are determined to be a plastic packaging company that our employees can be proud to work for, so I am engaged in various actions to ensure that we produce plastic packaging that is circular and sustainable. We know that plastic packaging doesn't have a great reputation, whereas bio-based alternatives are still riding the positive wave of consumer perception, but facts are facts, and seemingly bio-based alternatives are not the long-term solution they're being touted as, particularly at high volumes."

Bio-based packaging that is suitable for food contact is referred to as BBFCMS (Bio-Based Food Contact Materials) and it primarily comes from renewable sources that are either animal- or plant-sourced, usually as a by-product of agricultural or food production. Bio-based packaging that is labelled as biodegradable may likely require special conditions to degrade. Yet many of the terms used that catch the eyes and minds of consumers have yet to be officially quantified, or are easily misunderstood, leading to confusion in the best case and greenwashing in the worst.

Duffaut adds: "Bio-based doesn't mean sustainable. We need to have the full picture; there's a chance that we just replace the bogeyman with bio-based packaging as we don't yet know the sustainability of the waste materials used, or if it's economically-viable, or damaging to the agricultural supply chain. Agriculture is hugely contaminant (pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers), use lots of water and causes deforestation. Innovation is crucial and we must support new ideas, but we also have a responsibility to be effective and be able to guarantee any developments in the long-term, with life cycle analysis of the materials involved. By closing the loop and ensuring the circularity of plastics rather than jumping from one packaging material to the next, we can provide a long-term solution that makes the plastic value chain sustainable. Plastic packaging has to be produced in as resource-efficient manner possible and collection and recycling schemes must be properly implemented, so that there is enough collected post-consumer PET in the value chain to create rPET time and time again."

While bio-based packaging alternatives are an excellent support act to the plastic packaging industry and must be encouraged for brands that do not have the global volumes required by household names, the long-term answer must be a circular economy, which by its very nature must include a whole range of solutions, from PET to rPET to bio-based packaging. It's not either/or - bio-based materials can be used to produce polymers for PET packaging, for example. The common denominator must be responsibility: responsibility to design and create packaging that can be fully recycled in the most resource-efficient manner possible; responsibility to recycle used plastics; responsibility to meet the strictest regulations. Above all, responsibility to ourselves.