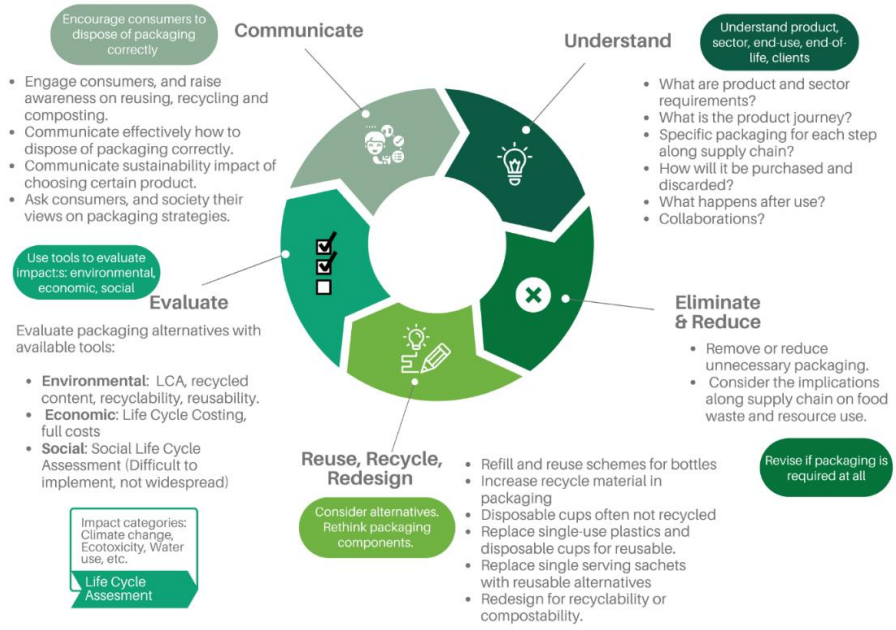
SAC CONSULTING
Part of Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

Choosing the Right Sustainable Packaging Strategy For Food & Drink MICRO AND SMEs



Choosing an optimal sustainable packaging strategy is vital for businesses in the food and drink industry. However, packaging is a hugely complex area, especially in such a diverse sector in which each category has its own standards and requirements.

What is the best sustainable packaging strategy for my business?

Sustainable packaging could mean different things to different people. Some might consider an alternative as sustainable because of the raw materials used to produce it, or how environmentally friendly and energy efficient the production process is. Others might think as a sustainable strategy the uses that are given to packaging throughout its life and the alternative end-of-life use. A sustainable packaging strategy could mean one or all those things!

The definition of what is sustainable encompasses many different aspects and it would be unrealistic for micro-enterprises and SMEs to tackle all the areas in one attempt. Sustainability is a continuous cyclic process of analysing and **(re)evaluating** business strategies and goals and how they align with their values.

Businesses in the food and drink sector might be in different stages along their sustainable packaging journey, thus the first piece of advice would be not to embark on any decision deliberately. Instead of focusing solely on material options and talking to suppliers for the latest biodegradable or compostable packaging alternative, businesses should consider where they currently sit in terms of sustainable packaging, what boxes their packaging ticks, what is it that needs to change immediately and what could be changed considering present resources and timelines. There are 5 key steps to consider:

1. **Understand.**
2. **Eliminate & reduce.**
3. **Reuse, Recycle & Redesign.**
4. **Evaluate.**
5. **Communicate.**

1. Understand

The first step to evaluating a sustainable packaging strategy is to understand products, business models and end consumers. Understanding the types of products, and sector requirements is essential as packaging specifications vary across and within sectors. It is also important to understand packaging components, packaging structure and purposes whether it is designed to be used once or multiple times, who is the final consumer(s) and where they are located. These are all baseline considerations to recognise how the strategy can change, what can be modified, replaced, reduced, or redesigned, and ultimately what are the goals for revising and adopting a sustainable packaging strategy. If possible, research where the product is being used and consumed, and the recycling systems in place. This will give longevity to any packaging strategy.

REDESIGN PACKAGING

Redesign for **recyclability**:

- Use mono materials for flexible plastics at supermarket level
- Bottle tops and caps.
- Internal plastic trays.
- Plastic cup lids

Redesign for **compostability** if:

- Not possible to redesign for reusability.
- Packaging is likely to be contaminated with food.
- Single-use
- **Examples**: Plastic coffee pods, tea bags, caddy liners, thin film for fresh produce.

2. Eliminate & Reduce

After in-depth consideration of the description and functionality of a product then businesses can research key factors and start asking relevant questions such as: could those components be totally or partially eliminated, reduced or substituted by other types of materials?

Some actions could include reducing, eliminating or replacing non-recyclable or difficult-to-recycle materials such as single-use or difficult-to-recycle plastics or materials with poor waste collection streams; reducing or removing unnecessary packaging; using sustainable alternatives and keeping materials in use if possible; reusing packaging where suitable waste streams exist, are all ways that can produce a more sustainable food packaging system.

Could the component be redesigned to be easily recyclable or compostable? This decision will depend upon a mix of different characteristics such as purpose, functionality and end-of-life.

For example, if a product needs single-use packaging which is not possible to redesign to be reusable, comes into contact with food, and for which there are no current collection or recycling

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

All plastic packaging CANNOT be recycled. The disposal of plastic will vary from one type of plastic to another. For example, some types of plastic such as **PET** or **PE** are widely recycled, but others such as flexible plastic packaging are extremely difficult to recover due to food

Plastic **cannot be recycled forever**, it cannot be recycled more than 6 times, but rarely happens more than once. The recycling process downgrades polymer quality and when this happens, additional virgin material needs to be added to the mix to upgrade its quality.

Many of the things that people think can be recycled, probably **never will be**. For example, in the UK due to waste collection streams in place, items such as drinking glasses, foil pouches, plastic film lids, and frozen veggie bags, among others, are not permitted in recycling bins. Most of the time these items end up contaminating these streams. However, low-density polyethene (**LDPE**) e.g., bread bags, frozen food bags, etc., could be dropped for collection at supermarkets.

systems in place then the component should be designed to be compostable.

Useful guides and reports on packaging materials:

Single-use Plastics

ZeroWaste Scotland: Moving away from single-use.

Recycling

ZeroWaste Scotland:

- Evidence for Plastics Recycling.
- Plastics recycling business opportunities.

WRAP

- Recycling guidelines.

Circular Economy

ZeroWaste Scotland: Living Circular: stakeholder toolkit.

WRAP: Creating a Circular Economy for Flexible Packaging.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation:

- Where compostable packaging fits in a circular economy.
- Flexible Packaging: Actions to Deliver Circular Economy Solutions.

4. Evaluate

After considering all the alternatives for the type of product, business model and business stage, then it is important to assess the environmental, social and economic impacts.

Assess the environmental, social and economic impacts, costs and benefits. It is essential to evaluate all the end-of-life alternatives for the products used as packaging. Although reuse and recycling are the best options for plastic packaging waste in a circular economy, sometimes these options are not technically or economically feasible, and energy recovery is a more resource-efficient way of disposing of mixed waste than disposing of it to landfill.

5. Communicate

The final step is to communicate packaging strategies not only to consumers but to all the different actors involved in the supply chain. Businesses should be honest about all the boxes their packaging strategies check and acknowledge the shortcomings in terms of sustainability. Engaging consumers to understand the strategies implemented is key to enabling better behaviours on how to properly dispose of packaging, and how it helps not only the business to achieve its sustainability goals but how it helps the environment and society as a whole.

Using and designing optimal packaging that considers all the environmental impacts throughout its life cycle is important to reduce the current exploitation of natural resources and raw materials. It is one step forward in the right direction to creating more resilient food systems and economies.

If you are considering changing your packaging strategy for one that is sustainable and tells your story or want to evaluate whether a new strategy in place is the right one for you, contact us. Our team has expertise in resource efficiency, Circular Economy, carbon assessments and sustainability and can apply this to food and drink businesses all over Scotland.

Visit our website to find more resources on packaging: recyclable packaging, understanding labels and the overall environmental impacts of packaging.