Making plastics packaging circular

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There is an urgent need to change the way we produce, consume and dispose of our waste, writes Antonino Furfari.

Plastics packaging | *Photo credit: Adobe Stock*

There is an urgent need to change the way we produce, consume and dispose of our waste. This is particularly important for plastics, which need to be redesigned and their waste management improved.

Increased collection and efficient sorting, retaining the maximum value of waste at the end of its life as well as making plastic products fully recyclable, are key to making a difference.

An essential step in delivering this change is sustainable design in production of plastics. Industry must start designing their products with recyclability as a key factor.

Plastics recycling doesn't begin with collection, but with design. Product design is a crucial step in achieving high-quality collection, sorting and recycling.

Every plastic product has multiple design features which depend on the specific functionalities that a given application requires - some exhibit high-impact resistance, others are made to prolong the shelf lives of products, while having to comply with food contact regulations.

Therefore, it is essential that specific guidelines are followed, incorporating all necessary features without obstructing Product Recyclability.

Product Recyclability is its ability to be collected, sorted and recycled at the end of its life in an efficient and economically feasible manner, to produce a new product.

> "Plastics recycling doesn't begin with collection, but with design. Product design is a crucial step in achieving high-quality collection, sorting and recycling"

With a well-designed product the entire recycling process becomes more efficient and profitable. At the end of its life, a product will be more easily and cost-efficiently sorted. What is more, high-quality recyclates can be used in a number of high-end applications, including those used for food contact.

Plastic waste can be turned into a high-end product if it is designed in line with the recycling technologies.

Nowadays far too many inseparable polymers, redundant additives or mixed materials are used in the production of plastics. Materials which are incompatible with recycling hamper the ability to separate and recycle plastics into high value raw materials, as their properties are downgraded.

RecyClass [9], an online tool for plastic packaging recyclability, has a solution to this problem and was established with the aim of improving the design of packaging so that it is easily recyclable into high-quality recyclates.

> "Dialogue and better communication among the different actors, including consumers, is crucial to the success of transforming our linear production model into a circular one"

Recycling experts worked together to establish design for recycling guidelines on which the tool is based. It is an analysis tool, which ranks the recyclability of an actual product. With the analysis results and the recommendations, companies can work at increasing the recyclability of their products.

These design for recycling guidelines are made in accordance with the available technologies and recyclers' best practices on the European market. They are continuously updated according to the market developments and laboratory tests results.

Different aspects of a packaging design are covered, such as colours, barriers, labels, adhesives, caps, lids and many others. Recyclability of a product is then graded on a scale from A to F, with the A grade being Fully Recyclable and F being Unrecyclable.

Companies genuinely interested in recyclability have an option to consult the newly launched **RecyClass Platform** [10] – the initiative which provides customised and dedicated guidance along with the possibilities to certify and label their products.

Working towards making plastic packaging fully recyclable is a task for the whole industry. Dialogue and better communication among the different actors, including consumers, is crucial to the success of transforming our linear production model into a circular one.

About the author

Antonino Furfari is the Managing Director of Plastics Recyclers Europe

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