

ANALYSIS

PUSHING OUT THE PLASTIC

SELLING PRINT AS AN ECO-FRIENDLY ALTERNATIVE

DECEMBER 2021





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Introduction

Although plastic has been around since the latter half of the 1800s, it didn't really catch on until the 1950s. At this time, America was ready for a lighter standard of living after an era of multiple wars and The Great Depression. Plastic manufacturers marketed their product accordingly, showcasing its capabilities as a durable, light-weight, hassle-free alternative to the materials of the past.

Figure 1: Plastic Advertisement from the 1950s



Source: The HuffPost

Of course, it goes without saying that much has changed since the 1950s. In the US and around the world, fears of climate change are growing as droughts, fires, storms, and other extreme weather events become increasingly common. There is a real concern that, unless humanity invests in more sustainable practices, the damage to the environment could be catastrophic.

Plastic, once considered the perfect material for practically any situation, is now under increased scrutiny. There are numerous reasons for this, but a lot of it comes down to plastic's durability. This might seem counterintuitive, but plastic's strength and longevity has become a liability as garbage and waste continues to pile up on a global basis. People are also faced with the disturbing knowledge that microplastics now penetrate virtually every living thing on our planet.



Something that has become an issue for plastic may represent an opportunity for paper manufacturers, provided they can address their own problematic past when it comes to environmental damage and deforestation. With a combination of sustainability initiatives and the right marketing languages, print service providers (PSPs) can position the degradable nature of print as a serious advantage over the growing plastic problem.

The Complex Reality of Recycling

The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone back into their homes, at least for the short term, and enabled us to re-evaluate our daily practices. Recycling was just one of these practices, but some may wonder if recycling even makes a difference. This very topic has headlined dozens of articles over the past two years, and the answer to the question is essentially this—recycling is worth it, but it needs to be done correctly.

While the global practice of putting recyclable trash on boats and sending it to other countries for processing seems needlessly obtuse, it can make a difference in terms of sustainability – at least sometimes.¹ The simple truth about recycling is that there are no easy answers or solutions. Recycling is performed using a variety of very different practices and materials, and all of them have their own benefits and shortcomings.

According to National Geographic, an incredible 91% of plastic is not recycled.² The reasons for this include confusion at the consumer level—there are many different types of plastic and not all of them are easily disposed of using individual recycling bins. In addition, since plastic waste is not always measured, it is not always regulated. This basically means that a company can dispose of large amounts of recyclable plastic improperly with no immediate repercussions. In the US in 2018, a little less than 9% of plastic was recycled—the majority of which was plastic bottles.³

Paper, by contrast, is easily and very often recycled. Going back to that 2018 data, 67% of everything recycled that year in the US was paper-based.⁴ Paper is far and away the most recycled material on the planet, making it an eco-friendly alternative to plastic. In addition, even if not recycled, most paper decomposes within six weeks. Just for comparison, it takes 400+ years for plastic to begin breaking down! The message is clear—the human race might be drowning in waste, but it's certainly not paper waste.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2021/01/recycling-wont-solve-climate-change/617851/>

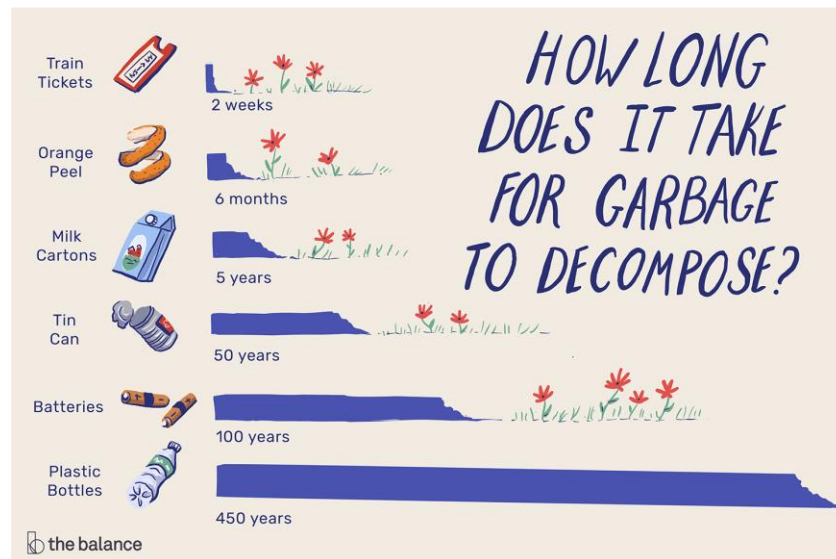
² <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/whopping-91-percent-plastic-isnt-recycled/>

³ <https://www.livescience.com/how-much-plastic-recycling.html>

⁴ <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials>



Figure 2: Decomposition Rates of Various Materials



Source: The Balance

Growing Awareness About Climate Change

While these recycling statistics are valuable for use in a marketing campaign, climate change is the real driver behind print's push for sustainability. Formerly known as global warming, climate change is causing many people to rethink the way they live, especially the younger generations. In relation to their older counterparts, Millennials and Gen Z consumers are more likely to view climate change as a priority issue that demands action.

Research gathered by the Pew Research Center shows that members of Gen Z in particular are willing to undergo shifts in behavior—including transitioning away from oil-based energy and gas-powered cars—to slow the pace of climate change.⁵ They are also more willing to spend extra money if it means that the goods they purchase are eco-friendly and sustainable.

Paper's Advantages Over Plastic

While climate change and print may not have immediate associations, the advantages are revealed when unraveling the various aspects of climate impact and noting the emphasis on sustainability and reducing negative eco-impact. This document already highlighted the pollution aspect in the previous section (paper trash will disappear much quicker than plastic trash), but this is only one aspect of the argument for paper.

Part of the push toward sustainability is the desire to return to "the natural." In this case, natural refers to a (largely perceived) absence of industrialization, chemical use, and

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/>



processing. For example, a plastic bag is in no way natural. At first glance, most people would be unable to determine where the bag came from and, apart from the plastic, how it was made.

Paper, by contrast, can appear much more natural if it is prepared and packaged properly. Even though most people already know this, highlighting that paper is natural (i.e., made from wood) and thus biodegradable can help position it as more environmentally friendly.

Figure 3: Paper-Based Bowls Highlighting their Eco-Friendliness



Source: Amazon

Rewriting the Narrative on Paper's Sustainability

Of course, it would be untrue to claim that paper is intrinsically superior to plastic in terms of sustainability. Paper is heavier and involves more steps in its manufacturing, thus raising its carbon footprint. Nevertheless, until there exists a way to safely and effectively dispose of the 6 billion tons of plastic garbage already littering the planet, PSPs have an opportunity to rewrite the narrative by highlighting and emphasizing the sustainable aspects of their offerings.

Increasing paper's sustainability is largely based on recycling efforts—in this case using recycled paper as much as possible in finished products. According to findings from Penn State⁶, using recycled paper over fresh or virgin wood reduces air pollution by nearly 75% and water consumption by half. Given the ease of paper recycling, PSPs should take steps to not only engage in the process whenever possible, but explore opportunities to reuse that recycled paper in future products, thus reducing the need for more deforestation.

⁶ <https://www.pennwaste.com/recycling/why-recycle/>



Another way to improve the sustainability image of print is to highlight when fewer toxic chemicals are used, be it in paper treatment, use of dyes, or any other aspect of the creation process. This means moving away from petroleum-based inks and chlorine-based bleaches and favoring soy and vegetable-based inks when possible. Aqueous-based inks can also be an option. While it seems like these inks are only used in the creation of print, the reality is that those chemicals linger, soaking back into the ground as the print decays. If the chemicals were changed, print could in theory nourish the ground rather than poisoning it.

Figure 4: An Eco-Friendly Printed Communication Containing Seeds



Source: Boxcar Press

Lastly, the move toward shorter runs and on-demand printing has had positive impacts on print's carbon footprint. In the past, longer runs of print typically produced a large amount of waste, regardless of what was being printed or what it was being printed on. Shorter print runs make it possible to only use the materials needed to make the product, eliminating the production of print that might otherwise end up on the cutting room floor.



opinion

Opinion

The importance of sustainability and environmental awareness will only increase as time goes on. Every storm, every drought, every flood will bring climate change more into the forefront of public consciousness. In addition, as the younger generations age and further develop their lives and careers, they will likely bring with them a passion for addressing this problem.

PSPs need to think about how they are branded and the characteristics that are associated with their products. Today's printing companies have an opportunity to be viewed in a more positive light when it comes to sustainability. To be seen as eco-friendly, PSPs must use environmentally friendly processes whenever possible, and this includes a consideration of chemicals and inks that are used. It is also important to examine the supply chain to determine if any services can be performed more ethically and sustainably. Once all of this has been accomplished, there's only one final step—make sure your customers and prospects know what you're doing for the environment!



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