



How can food packaging become more environmentally friendly? DLG study "Sustainable Packaging 2024" shows opportunities and challenges

Companies in the food industry are currently faced with the question of how they should organise their activities to increase the environmental friendliness of their packaging. In order to meet this need for information, the DLG (Deutsche Landwirtschafts-Gesellschaft - German Agricultural Society), in cooperation with the Münster University of Applied Sciences, produced the study "Sustainable Packaging 2024". It provides insights into the status quo - from the consumer's perspective to the specific strategies for implementation in companies. The results of the study will also be presented as part of the "Sustainable Packaging" special show at ProSweets Cologne, which will take place in Cologne, Germany from 28 to 31 January 2024.

The search for suitable and affordable solutions that can increase the environmental friendliness of the packaging used often proves to be difficult and requires a great deal of expertise for companies in the food industry. With the current study "Sustainable Packaging 2024", the DLG provides sound insights into the status quo for food products. The consumer and company surveys conducted are representative of the prospects and challenges that can arise for companies from the use of particularly environmentally friendly packaging. The focus is on the topics of " Consumers", "Labelling" and "Strategies". Each of the three parts is intended to provide important data and a basis for orientation, say the study authors Prof. Holger Buxel, Professor of Marketing in the Food Sector at the Münster University of Applied Sciences, and Dipl.-Ing. Simone Schiller MPH, Managing Director of the DLG Competence Center Food (Fachzentrum Lebensmittel).

Packaging from the consumer's point of view

The market-related opportunities that arise for companies in the food industry from the use of environmentally friendly packaging depend heavily on how relevant and attractive it is from the consumer's point of view and how important the topic is in everyday consumer behaviour and in

the handling of food products. But what role do these aspects actually play in the purchasing decision? The survey of 1,000 consumers conducted in spring 2023 shows that: The environmental friendliness of the packaging is a relevant feature for many of them. Four out of five people surveyed (79 %) agree with the statement that the environmental friendliness of the packaging used for food urgently needs to be improved. Ultimately, however, it is just one property among many. According to the study, other aspects play an equally important or in some cases even a significantly greater role in both product selection and the evaluation of packaging at the point of sale. These include the flavour, the quality and the price. The willingness to pay a premium for packaging with positive environmental properties is also clearly limited. It also becomes clear: Although consumers see potential for improvement in their own behaviour (38 %), the majority of them believe that other groups, such as packaging manufacturers (67 %) and food producers (58 %), are responsible for being more environmentally friendly.

"Companies are faced with the key challenge of developing more environmentally friendly packaging concepts that are geared towards consumers' willingness to pay and their willingness to change their own purchasing and disposal behaviour," says Prof. Holger Buxel. According to him, another requirement should be to communicate the environmental properties and benefits of the packaging used in a targeted manner and to make them "tangible for consumers". This is because the results of the study show that many consumers do not recognise ecologically beneficial packaging without specific information. "This makes the development of suitable communication concepts absolutely essential," says Prof. Buxel.

About the effect of claims

In order to provide a basis for the design of such strategies, the second part of the study focuses on information behaviour with regard to the environmental aspects of food packaging. "It has been shown that two out of three (65 %) of the consumers surveyed would like more information on the environmental aspects of packaging," explains Prof. Buxel. For example, whether the packaging can be fully recycled and how it can be disposed of in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Whether packaging is made from renewable raw materials and recycled materials is also relevant for consumers. Specific instructions and a standardised system are preferred. Claims directly on the packaging are ideal here, as according to the study these are most frequently used as a source of information about the environmental properties of packaging. The most familiar of the established labels in Germany among those surveyed is the Green Dot (76 %), the reusable label (76 %) and the recycling

triangle (74 %).

At the same time, consumers are calling for more transparency in the statements. The study shows: The more comprehensible a claim is, the higher the purchasing relevance tends to be. And the higher the perceived importance of environmental protection, the more relevant a claim tends to be to purchasing. This applies in particular to statements that deal with the topics of reusability/recyclability and recycling. The topic of "climate protection" is categorised as comparatively less relevant - despite its high profile in general discussions and the media. "The claims available on the market differ greatly in terms of their comprehensibility and relevance to the consumer. As a result, the choice made will ultimately play a decisive role in the extent to which the environmental benefits of packaging can be made visible and translated into increased acceptance of the product," says Prof. Buxel. In view of the widely varying impact of the claims, he recommends that companies carefully examine which labels and seals should be used in each individual case in order to maximise the market potential of using environmentally friendly packaging.

Strategies for resource-friendly packaging

As the results of the third part of the study show, increasing the environmental friendliness of packaging is high on the food industry's agenda. Just under one in two (49 %) of the 186 companies from industry and the skilled trades surveyed already have a strategy, while an additional 24 % are currently working on one. The most important reason cited by companies is to improve environmental protection (84 %), followed by aspects such as improving their image (82 %) and increasing competitiveness (81 %). The most frequently mentioned goals include increasing the recyclability of packaging, followed by reducing the amount of material and energy used per packaging unit. Key measures include increasing the proportion of recycled input materials, followed by increasing the proportion of materials that come from sustainability-certified sources. "Overall, the approaches pursued are diverse," explains Simone Schiller. "The majority of the companies surveyed have already achieved success and have introduced new packaging solutions over the past two years that are more environmentally friendly than their previous packaging."

Nevertheless, the study results also show that: The majority of those surveyed believe that consumers' unwillingness to pay for more environmentally friendly packaging is a major obstacle. Added to this is the limited availability of alternative or recycled materials and the additional costs associated with their use. Product protection-related aspects, poorer storage and transportability and the ability to fulfil demanding hygiene requirements are also cited as

barriers to the introduction of modified packaging. "It is to be expected that increasing the environmental friendliness of the packaging used will be an issue that will probably continue to occupy many in the food industry in the coming years," says Schiller. The DLG will also address the industry topic at ProSweets Cologne 2024, which takes place from 28 to 31 January in Cologne, Germany, where the three-part study will be presented as part of the special show "Sustainable Packaging".

About the study

The topic of sustainability is of central importance to the food industry. Consumers, as well as government institutions and NGOs, are increasingly demanding that companies in the sector produce their products as sustainably as possible and minimise the negative impact of production, use and disposal on the environment. In addition to the food itself, this requirement applies above all to the packaging used. The Sustainable Packaging 2024 study was conducted by the DLG (German Agricultural Society) in collaboration with Prof. Holger Buxel (Münster University of Applied Sciences) with the aim of gaining an insight into the status quo of the importance and implementation of environmentally friendly food packaging concepts. The detailed results of the consumer survey (n=1,000) and company survey (n=186) conducted for this purpose in March/April 2023 are summarised in three publications.

The study is available for download at <https://www.dlg.org/en/food/topics/studies> .

Media Contact:

Regina Hübner
Pressereferentin Food & Food Supply Chain
+49 69 24788-206
R.Huebner@dlg.org

About DLG

DLG (Deutsche Landwirtschafts-Gesellschaft e.V. – German Agricultural Society), founded in 1885 by Max Eyth, is an open network and serves as a professional voice of agriculture, agribusiness and the food industry. Its goal is to promote progress by transferring and communicating knowledge, quality and technology. DLG has over 30,000 members. It is politically independent and internationally networked. As one of the leading organizations in its sector, DLG organizes trade fairs and events in the fields of agriculture and food technology, conducts tests of foods and beverages, agricultural machinery and equipment, as well as farm inputs, and in a large number of expert committees develops answers to the challenges confronting agriculture, agribusiness and the food industry.