

No. 3 / November 2025, Cologne
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Packaging reinvented: ProSweets Cologne is placing the focus on solutions for a sustainable circular economy

The exhibitors will provide answers to the challenges in the sweets and snacks industry at the Cologne fair grounds, with a focus on packaging design and recyclability

Whether driven by consumers' needs or legal regulations - the theme sustainability plays a key role in the sweets and snacks industry. A combination between technical precision and the ideal packaging material is required. With a view to the requirements of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), companies have a strong interest in switching to paper or recyclable mono-films. ProSweets Cologne will concentrate on this theme from 1 to 4 February. Not only innovative packaging materials, but also highly-flexible machines capable of processing them will be showcased at the fair grounds in Cologne.

There is currently a broad public debate on which packaging is environmentally-friendly. This question is occupying many consumers and influences purchasing decisions at the point of sale. This is where the companies of the packaging industry come in, they will present solutions for the sweets and snacks industry at ProSweets Cologne from 1 to 4 February 2026. They have to respond to the demands of the consumers and trade and last, but not least to the legal stipulations by providing resource-saving materials and processes, wherever possible.

One option is the optimisation of existing packaging regarding the size and material strength, for example through more economical cuts or thinner trays. The smaller packaging sizes can only be realised if they can be filled without compromising quality. Pick-and-place robots play a central role in this process. They pick up the biscuits or chocolate bars and place them into trays, cartons or thermoformed trays with millimetre precision. This is why in addition to cartoners and flow-wrapping machines, the focus at the fair grounds in Cologne will be on innovative pick-and-place systems as well as whole packaging lines.

Packaging made eas(y)ier

But technical solutions alone are not enough. Packaging materials or processes often require comprehensive evaluation and testing to determine their suitability - not least in the light of the EU Regulation 2025/40 (Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, PPWR), which is pushing the implementation of sustainable solutions. It comes into force on 12 August 2026, with individual provisions coming into effect gradually. In this way, only packaging that is verifiably recyclable or reusable is to be brought onto the market by 2030. At the same time, the use of recycle is to be



ProSweets Cologne
01.02. - 04.02.2026
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increased and disposable packaging gradually reduced. Essential aspects also include the reduction of the packaging weight.

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The packaging specialists have been occupied with the trend towards sustainability for a long time and have developed in this connection material-saving wrapping methods for small sweets or optimised their machines to suit the processing of particularly thin films. Now the companies exhibiting at the fair grounds in Cologne are upgrading their technologies to position themselves for the future: With modular high-performance packaging machines that have been further developed to process paper-based packaging materials. "Circular packaging is no longer an option for successful brands, it is a necessity which is increasingly becoming a success factor. The new EU Packaging Regulation has accelerated this change even further," said Guido Hentschke, Director of ProSweets Cologne and ISM Ingredients.

Shaping the transformation to a circular economy

The PPWR pursues a clear goal: Packaging should become more eco-friendly in every phase of its life cycle. Sweet and snack manufacturers across Europe, as in the entire food industry, are thus faced with demands that will significantly change their packaging design, choice of material and logistics processes. It is thus important to begin switching over at an early stage. "Fully recyclable mono-materials are more difficult to process. They require strict process controls and the right packaging machine," Hentschke pointed out.

The machine manufacturers and packaging material producers are supporting their customers in implementing the PPWR regulations and with the development of future-proof packaging designs, which includes analysing the material characteristics as well as practical machine tests. At the outset, the experts analyse whether the existing packaging range complies with the regulatory demands or possibly has to be optimised. "The discussion about the carbon footprint of packaging and PPWR-conform solutions needs less gut instinct and more facts. At ProSweets Cologne, we want to make the discussion more objective to enable producers to come to well-founded investment decisions," said Hentschke. The Expert Stage in Hall 10.1 also gives insights into the PPWR. Here, a high-class line-up of experts will provide fact-based knowledge on packaging, recycling and the circular economy on all four days of the trade fair.

Making tubular bags future-proof

Above all composite materials, which are indispensable in many sectors of the food industry, present a major challenge. They offer advantages like long shelf lives and good protection against moisture and oxygen, but are difficult to recycle. The exhibitors of ProSweets Cologne are addressing this issue and are increasingly offering totally recyclable solutions. For products like nut-free chocolate or muesli bars that don't require high barriers, paper-based materials can be a good solution. The newly developed mono-films or fibre-based alternatives are however more demanding regarding the sealing. Here, innovative technologies are coming to the fore which can process both conventional heat-sealing films as well as more sustainable variants.

The latest generation of flow-wrapping machines comprises of highly flexible

systems that can process both conventional as well as new films. They not only use ultrasonic technology to this end, but optionally also ceramic heating elements for longitudinal sealing. Variable temperatures optimally adapt the process to suit both to the requirements of the packaging material and the resilience of the product to be packed - this prevents damage to the packaging material and ensures gentle processing of both. At the same time the machines offer a high degree of flexibility: Various bag formats can be produced and filled successively with minimal changeover times. Only a few steps are needed to convert the machine to the respective product. Whereby all format areas and bag shapes can be processed. Different dosing units and special applications can be easily integrated.

Paper is gaining significance

Single-material products made of polyethylene (PE) or polypropylene (PP) can be recycled without material separation - this provides clarity in the recycling stream and leads to truly circular products that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, the PPWR also demands mandatory recycle shares for plastic packaging. But how can this be achieved? Whereas the stipulations for PET drinking bottles are within reach thanks to established materials and processes, the situation for packaging for sweets, cereals and snacks is considerably more difficult. At present, there is hardly any material on the market that is suitable for sensitive food applications. Nevertheless, the recycle share in this packaging has to be 10 percent by 2030.

Against this backdrop, many manufacturers are opting for paper-based packaging. However, paper is more delicate than plastic, it tears or creases faster and thus has to be handled carefully - especially in the case of vertical packaging that individually packed sweets are placed inside. The technologies shown at ProSweets Cologne offer numerous possibilities for innovative packaging made from fibre-based materials. Switching from multipacks to paper also holds great potential: The barrier function and thus the product protection is already provided by the primary packaging - the multipack can do without further coatings and be made of up to 95 percent paper. Thanks to the subsequent adaption of the sealing unit and forming shoulder, vertical tubular bag machines can be converted to paper without any loss in performance. This allows manufacturers to produce all common bag types such as pillow and block bottom bags, Doy stand-up pouches from paper - without creases or tears.

Support for PPWR-compliant reporting

A further aspect will be discussed in Cologne at the exhibition stands and on the Expert Stage: The integration of the new requirements into the existing quality management systems - because the companies of the sweets and snacks industry are required to provide more detailed reports on their packaging in future. The implementation of the PPWR will therefore virtually impossible without the use of digital tools. Visitors of ProSweets Cologne 2026 can familiarise themselves with this topic early on to minimise the regulatory risks and benefit from sustainable innovations long-term.

Koelnmesse - industry trade fairs for the food technology sector: Koelnmesse is an international leader in organising trade fairs in the field of food and beverage processing. Anuga FoodTec and ProSweets Cologne are established, world-leading

trade fairs, hosted in Cologne/Germany. In addition to the events at its Cologne headquarters, Koelnmesse also stages further food technology trade fairs with different sector-specific areas of focus and content in key markets across the world, including India, Italy and Colombia. These global activities enable Koelnmesse to offer its customers bespoke events and leading regional trade fairs in a variety of markets, thus creating the foundation for sustainable international business. Koelnmesse is also ideally positioned in the field of food and beverages with its leading international trade fairs Anuga and ISM and its global network of satellite events.

Further information: <https://www.prosweets.com/fair/industry-sectors>

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