

Safety vs sustainability - the packaging industry's key conundrum

By [Nthabiseng Motsoeneng](#)

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The Covid-19 pandemic calls for a paradigm shift in how the packaging industry meets consumer's safety concerns while addressing the very real threat of climate change.



Nthabiseng Motsoeneng, Tetra Pak

Growing awareness of the effects of climate change has meant that sustainability is a key concern for any industry. This has been overtaken by the debilitating effects of Covid-19 on health, communities and the economy – and with it, a disruption to every aspect of life.

Priorities shifted overnight: individuals were forced to relook – and change – set patterns of behaviour, and “pivot” became a rallying cry for businesses.

Established supply chains were summarily disrupted; quarantines and isolation led to a surge in deliveries, and safe packaging that limits the spread of the virus became a key concern – as did a renewed focus on food safety.

Results from Tetra Pak’s global consumer research, carried out in mid-2020 and recently published in our [Tetra Pak Index report 2020](#) found that food safety is now a major issue for more than two-thirds of respondents, with environmental sustainability still a major, but secondary concern. Coupled with this is a demand for transparency and need for trust.

This has deep implications for the food packaging industry, notably because packaging can, and does, cause problems for the planet. And there is much more to sustainable packaging than merely recycling, using eco-friendly alternatives, or reducing waste.

A holistic environmental approach that reduces the energy intensity, carbon emissions and end of life impact is vital to the preservation of our planet. This is why safe, sustainable food packaging demands a deeper future dive into innovation in operations, processes, materials and services – in short, the entire value chain.



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Solving for safety and sustainability

Technological advancements have played a major role in the progress already made in ensuring a robust, progressive food packaging industry. The impact of tech on design, too, cannot be overlooked: convenience, personalisation and aesthetics now play key roles in look, feel and usability of the end product.

Then there’s the role artificial intelligence is assuming in the entire product life cycle, with smart packaging providing full information on the journey and shelf life of the contents of a package.

Burning issues

In 2021, we will no doubt see even greater progress in sustainable packaging. But we cannot do so without also paying closer attention to the burning issue of carbon recycling knowledge – and the effect that consumer demand has on ecological sustainability.



COVID-19 and the Food Safety-Environment Dilemma

Top 10 takeaways from Tetra Pak Index 2020

- 01 COVID-19 has transformed the consumer landscape**
COVID-19 has displaced the environment as the number one consumer concern, while other health-related issues have fallen sharply. Concerns around food safety and food security have risen significantly as consumers try to balance these with their worries about the environment, highlighting the dilemma that they face between these two subjects.
- 02 The changing interplay between food safety and the environment**
Food safety is rated an equal concern for society as COVID-19. Health is now connected to heightened issues of food safety and hygiene, two trends that being healthy is being safe. Improving food safety is cited as the number one priority for manufacturers. And this expectation will only increase as we need to feed a growing population, with food packaging playing a critical role.
- 03 Transparency and trust are more important than ever**
Consumers see manufacturers as responsible for food safety. Transparency is key, with almost three in five consumers saying they want to know all they can about product production. Provenance is among the top purchase drivers.
- 04 Food waste is rising up the agenda**
The impact of COVID-19 on supply chains has accelerated awareness of food waste as a key issue. More than three-quarters now see food waste as a concern – and limiting it is seen by consumers as one of the top three priorities for manufacturers.
- 05 Consumers want to help – but labelling is key**
Consumers see preventing food waste as the number one environmental issue that they can influence. But confusing “best before” labeling is a barrier. While regulators work to simplify clarity

68% of consumers agree that food safety is a health concern, but healthy

54% of consumers agree that food safety is a health concern, but healthy

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Knowledge is key. In 2021, we need more education campaigns that address the disconnect between packaging and safe food provision.

These should emphasise the critical role that packaging plays in our global food delivery system.

Sponsored school programmes on how individuals, families and communities can contribute to, and benefit from the circular economy will prove equally critical.

The industry itself needs to fast track any and all initiatives towards an end goal of net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 100% renewable energy by 2030.

This applies to every aspect of business and operations, including all elements of the value chain, such as raw materials, production and distribution, food protection and consumption, recycling and circularity.

South Africa has a robust and competitive packaging industry (valued at 37.3 billion units in 2019) thanks to progressive legislation, policies, a practice of responsible packaging and a well-regulated waste management plan.

Covid-19 has proved that crisis is a catalyst for change – and there has never been a better time to inform, collaborate and generate a wider debate about sustainability and the future role of packaging as we strive to meet the needs of people and planet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nhabiseng Mtseoneng is the Marketing Director for [https://www.tetrapak.com/en-za Tetra Pak] Southern Africa. She has more than 20 years' of experience in sales, merchandising, brands and marketing for some of the country's most respected retail brands. Nhabiseng is leading Tetra Pak Southern Africa's marketing into a new era of sustainability, harnessing purposeful marketing through her transformative portfolio strategy development. She unites Tetra Pak's commitment to food safety, sustainability and people with the needs of food and beverage manufacturers, retailers and consumers.

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