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News and Views from the Institute of Packaging Professionals

Trash Wars: The Continent Stands Ready

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Herndon, VA--Not since the rise of the domestic "trash crisis" of the late 1980s to the early 1990s has the packaging field faced such potentially devastating environmental challenges. Yes, the packaging-as-trash-waiting-to-happen issue is back . . . on a global scale. All packagers shipping goods into Europe will soon have to meet vague, yet restrictive, regulations governing how packages of all types are designed and made.

Victor A. Bell, CPP, president of Environmental Packaging International, is a specialist in worldwide packaging trends. As such, he's on the roster of speakers set to make presentations during IoPP's "Hot Topics" conference program at SouthPack '99, May 18-20. He's on top of the European situation and is, frankly, rolling his eyes and shaking his head at what he's been hearing.

"The centerpiece of the environmental movement in Europe is a set of new European Union packaging standards being developed," he says. "They're called the 'Essential Requirements,' and all packages must meet them before they can be sold in Europe."

The new rules already passed in France and the United Kingdom, but still in draft form elsewhere, are scheduled to be finalized this year and implemented across the EU in 2000. They require all packaging to meet minimal standards for recyclability, reusability, source reduction and elimination of heavy metals. Crucial to success of the burgeoning EU bureaucracy will be inspectors charged with hunting down, interrogating and deporting, in a sense, packagers whom they consider irresponsible.

Back to the Future

If you were in packaging a decade ago, you have some feeling (probably a bad one) for how nebulous and subjective environmental-impact judgments can be. As the American government tried to establish guidelines, bothersome questions kept packagers hog-tied in red tape: What makes one package "recyclable" and another not? How many times must a package be reused and by whom and when before it can be classified as reusable? And how far can source reduction go before a package ceases to function as a package?

While acknowledging that a great deal of semantics, politics and cronyism probably will infect the Essential Requirements, Bell says the rules won't necessarily result in the capricious banning of containers. "You can do anything you want," he says, "so long as you have a good reason and can prove it."

Packagers distributing goods in Europe will be required to keep an internal file on the package-development process. This file will have to contain documentation showing that every decision made regarding the materials chosen, the size selected, the decoration techniques employed and other factors were made with an eye to lessening the burden of waste. "Any enforcement officer can ask a company for these files and will be given 15 days to produce them," Bell says. If the resulting package initially is viewed as deficient under the new requirements, it might still be allowed, but only after an airtight rationale is accepted by the inspectors.

For the Sake of Argument

Let's say you want to use a glass bottle with a pressure-sensitive plastic label rather than paper with water-soluble glue, which might be the preferred EU material. Your files would have to provide evidence that you looked at other labeling systems, tested them and found they simply would not survive the distribution procedure. OK you're in.

Let's say you've got a carton that appears too large for the product inside. You would be asked to demonstrate that product protection, and not merely showmanship, drove the ostensibly overblown design. OK you're in, too.

How about the much-ballyhooed plastic beer bottle? Bell says the inspectors could reject it because they would know that glass was an available alternative and plastic would, in their view, contaminate the recycling stream. You're out!

The 'Good' News

The upside of all this, says Bell, is that if a package meets the Essential Requirements, it cannot be banned in any European country. But meeting them will not be easy.

Bell is developing checklists for his clients to use in determining whether their packages will satisfy the new requirements. He says this is a time consuming operation even if the client has only a handful of containers in use. The more different containers used, the greater the risk and the time required. Therefore, some sort of standardization seems likely.

On the other end of the spectrum, imagine what this will do to small companies without the financial wherewithal to hire consultants or make repeated trips overseas.

The new rules, part of the 1994 European Packaging Directive, were scheduled to take effect in 1998 but were not ready. They are now on track and looming large.

If that didn't light a fire under you, perhaps Bell's talk at SouthPack '99 will. I urge you to attend his presentation, listen up and take notes. Those pesky Euro-guys not to mention the Asians are about to make your life...well, interesting, in a most uncomfortable way.

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