

# Flexible packaging a sweet conundrum?

Consumers are increasingly aware of the environmental impact of the packaging of their sweets. This forces 'plastics' high on the agenda of manufacturers and retailers. With flexible packaging offering both opportunities and challenges, here Rafael Zamora, Director of Technology Europe from Selig Group, discusses how Selig Group's flexibles division has been tackling the issue of packaging sustainability with Swiss, German and Austrian confectioners.

## Snack bars and confectionery big business in Europe

The confectionery and snack food segment is big business in Europe, and this looks set to continue to be the case for some years to come. Taking a look at snack bars and confectionery in particular; according to recent figures, the European snack bar market is expected to reach USD 3.7 billion by 2025<sup>1</sup>. However, confectionery continues to dominate, with the European market worth USD 71.05 billion in 2021. The sweetest toothed consumers in Europe appear to be the Swiss, who eat an average volume of 35.7kg of confectionery per person, with Germany and the UK trailing significantly behind them, with averages of 23kg and 22.6kg respectively.

## European confectionery packaging

When it comes to the priorities that manufacturers are placing on European confectionery packaging, recent industry research has shown that the number one driver is for the packaging to be lightweight and easily transportable, followed by an increasing focus on sustainable solutions. Not surprisingly, extended product shelf life, hygiene promotion and ease of use are still key packaging requirements.

Globally, plastic-based packaging represents nearly 80% of all retail snack packaging, compared to only 16% of paper-based, yet three out of four consumers are prepared to pay an additional amount for products in sustainable packaging. As well as making environmental sense, transitioning away from non-sustainable flexible confectionery and snack bar packaging can make economic sense. The challenge for manufacturers however, is what material to switch to and will it deliver the protection and production line speeds needed to make it feasible?

## A case in point

These are the questions that Selig Group's flexibles division was being asked by its Swiss, German, and Austrian confectionery and snack bar customers and this led the company on a product development journey. The aim was to develop a range of sustainably sensitive packaging that could accommodate production line speeds, whilst promoting product integrity. As a result of this research work, over half of Selig's customers have now moved to using PP based structures for their food and confectionery packaging and still others are exploring the potential of compostable films.

## Mono-materials in practice

When it comes to building sustainability



into flexible packaging, no one size fits all. Logically, customers want a minimum of disruption on their production lines without any compromise to their high food packaging standards, however, each product has different requirements that need to be accommodated. Here are some themes that have come out of Selig's work in this area of solution's research. In the main, customers are focusing strongly on mono-materials to replace laminates and foils. Even though the recycling facilities in many regions are not set up for example for polypropylene (PP) yet, they still want mono-materials that are fundamentally recyclable.

Recent examples include two cereal bar manufacturers, who wanted to replace PET in PET/OPP laminates using a PP single-material packaging. The solutions they wanted had to offer effective barriers against oxygen, moisture, and mineral oils and one of the producers also needed good puncture resistance. Selig's Ecoflex solution, made from >80% recyclable polypropylene was used, as it can be used on cold seal applications, provides excellent barrier and puncture protection and can be processed on most packaging equipment at high speed. Importantly, the packaging - in printed form - is detectable in most sorting plants located in Europe and can be assigned to the PP recycling stream.

A baby snack food producer also wanted to move from a PET/OPP laminates format to a recyclable mono-material, as part of a sustainability overview of their entire product range. Selig trialled a mono-material with them that could accommodate the speeds of their production line and used a solution that had a heat-sealing layer that was ideal for very low sealing temperatures. Following successful trials, the company transferred its baby snack foods to this solution, enabling a 'recyclable packaging' claim to be made on-pack.

## Plastic-free/compostable packaging

As well as a focus on recyclable mono-materials, some of Selig's customers have wanted to switch to plastic free packaging, so they can maximise the on-pack marketing of this message. A Swiss chocolate confectioner asked Selig for a plastic-free solution and a compostable material was trialled. Despite being a slightly higher price point than non-compostable films, the marketing value to the confectioner has made this switch a highly successful one in terms of both sales and brand reputation. In fact, Selig is seeing plastic-free packaging solutions increasingly requested by customers, as they look to increase the number of sustainability claims they can make concerning their product ranges.

Although there are many challenges to overcome when it comes to increasing the sustainability of confectionery and snack bar packaging, Selig's work with Swiss, German, and Austrian producers shows that change can be good. No one-size-fits-all, but as materials develop, there are an increasing range of sustainable flexible packaging solutions available.

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