

Packaging and Sustainability

Late last year the Board of the Packaging Council commissioned Russ Martin and MS2 along with David Perchard of Perchards to research and produce a Report on the Status of Sustainable Packaging in Australia. That Report is now close to finalization and Russ will follow me and present its major findings. Before he does so, I would just like to briefly explain the background and thinking behind the Boards decision.

Sustainability is now a major issue for the users and producers of packaging. Indeed, that has been the case for some time.

We don't think this is a passing phase - that the sustainability issue is a temporary fad! It is quite clear that the users of packaging want "sustainable" packaging and the manufacturers are responding. In short, sustainability is now a major commercial driver.

That's the easy bit. The more difficult bit for companies is how they actually respond – how they pursue sustainability in a practical sense. Inevitably it involves compromises, trade-offs and difficult choices. It also means addressing and debunking some widely held beliefs – for example, that less packaging necessarily means better packaging; or that recyclability is the best and only test of the environmental credentials of packaging.

Sustainability also presents difficult issues for governments and policy makers. How do you put in place policies that drive sustainability in the packaging supply chain? Traditionally Governments have relied on policy instruments such as bans, levies, taxes and targets. But governments cannot micro-manage sustainability. How do you "legislate" to make companies "better" design their packaging?

Sustainability also has implications for the National Packaging Covenant. Three years ago when approving the second Covenant, Ministers set an overall recycling target of 65%. I suspect that if we were negotiating the

Covenant now we would have a different and more diverse set of targets – perhaps ones also relating to water and energy usage.

There was one other important consideration. Too often in this country we argue and debate these issues on the basis of European data and policy. Implicitly, there is an assumption that what the Europeans are doing represents “best practice” and that we should follow their policy example. So one important issue was for us to benchmark the Australian performance on the basis of Australian issues and Australian data.

So these were some of the issues behind the thinking of the Board of the Packaging Council when a year ago they produced the statement entitled “Towards Sustainable Packaging”. This was both a vision statement and a statement of practical intent.

That, in turn, led to the Report by Russ Martin and David Perchard which will go to the PCA Board at its next meeting on 21 May. The intention is that the Report will become a public document and be an annual fixture.

The instructions to Russ and David were clear and unequivocal – the report was to be independent, rigorous, accurate and relevant; it needed to document strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures and make clear specific recommendations for future action. It was not to be a ‘green wash’.

And it isn’t. That’s not to say that next years and subsequent reports won’t refine and build on the solid base set by this years Report. But the Report does, for the first time, provide a detailed and comprehensive look at packaging sustainability from an Australian perspective.
