

To #BeatPlasticPollution this World Environment Day, we must listen to the consumer

World Environment Day, on 5th June 2023, is a worldwide campaign calling for global solutions to combat the source of plastic pollution. Managing plastic waste has become a major challenge globally. More than [400 million tonnes of plastic](#) is produced every year, half of which is designed to be used only once; any initiative that can draw attention to the problem is wholeheartedly endorsed by Pro Carton.

The key to solving the crisis lies in raising awareness about the complexity and severity of the issue, to both legislators and businesses. On November 30th 2022, the European Commission presented the proposal to amend the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR). Although the objectives were set with good intentions the decision to focus on the implementation of reusable packaging raised some eyebrows.

On the surface, advocating for reusable packaging to eradicate single-use packaging seems like a logical decision. After all, it can help to divert more packaging from landfill by reducing the number of packages on the market and raising the number of use cycles. Yet, the bigger picture is more complex, risking harming something that is a non-negotiable if the policy is to be a success: consumer engagement.

A new report by McKinsey titled [‘The potential impact of reusable packaging’](#) has found that imposing strict reusable packaging targets by 2030 will severely impact the EU’s environmental footprint and the competitiveness and resilience of the European economy. Assessing the switch to reusable packaging for takeaway food service in Belgium by 2030, the study revealed potential additional CO2 emissions of 140-160%+, and possible cost increases of 80-130%, mainly due to transport and cleaning. If one thing’s for certain, consumers want to know that the systems and policies in place are optimal for the environment, and their pockets. It could be argued this is not the case where reusable packaging is concerned.

There are also a number of negative societal implications that could be harmful to consumer acceptance, essential to securing high return rates, and high rotation rates. These include implementing systems that require radical behavioural change. In Germany, for example, fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s and Burger King have set up deposit systems for reusable packaging, requiring consumers, instead of simply discarding recyclable packaging as they leave the restaurant, to rinse and return their reusable packaging. It also creates potential complications around price – a deposit can drive up the price of a ‘value’ meal by up to 10 euros – and food hygiene. Can consumers trust that their reusable packaging will be effectively washed, especially those returned uncleaned after days of storage at home or in the car?

The owners and managers of fast-food restaurants know the best packaging solutions for their customers’ needs. There will be different requirements for in-house and take-away meals as well as in-city and out-of-city locations. Scientific knowledge and consumer requirements will need to be included in the decision-making process. A combination of different options will deliver the best outcome.

Our recently commissioned European consumer research in Germany also points to a preference of single-use packaging in many use cases. More than three quarters those polled believed that recyclable, biodegradable carton packaging is better for the environment, two thirds declared they would prefer brands to invest in biodegradable, carton containers that can be recycled, while over 60% would prefer to dispose of their packaging for recycling, rather than storing, rinsing and returning reusable plastic packaging to a collection point.

On World Environment Day, we encourage legislators to revisit this issue, and ask themselves honestly whether this current approach will resolve the plastic problem. Single-use easy to recycle packaging, such as cartonboard, the packaging material with the highest recycling rates and that preferred by consumers, must play a decisive role alongside the reusable system.