

How Label Converters Can Help Build A More Sustainable Future



Sustainability is an evolving phenomenon. What was once a niche (often ignorable) trend has turned into smart business. And as landfills approach capacity, governments enact stricter regulations, and consumers more often consider carbon footprint in their buying decisions, more brands are committing to help build a circular economy.

Label converters can play a critical role in this evolution. As they serve the brands that have made these ambitious commitments, converters must, in turn, seek out more sustainable solutions from their material suppliers and others in the value chain. The good news is that those solutions are becoming increasingly available.

How can label converters help build a more sustainable future? Here are a few ways.

Seek out innovative adhesive solutions that improve plastic recyclability

According to a 2022 report by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), only 4% of plastic is recycled in the U.S., and only 9% is recycled globally. However, new technologies are poised to help increase those percentages and advance the circular economy.

Converters can now choose new and innovative formulations for label adhesives designed to improve plastic recyclability. These adhesives are engineered to work with the recycling process (PET or HDPE), preventing contamination of the recycling stream by unrecyclable label material.

And while these innovative products are engineered to optimize plastic recycling, they offer performance characteristics similar to traditional adhesives.

Choose labeling solutions that create less waste

Another area of opportunity for creating a circular economy involves reducing and eliminating liner and matrix waste.

Liner and matrix waste may seem like an afterthought in the sustainability landscape; most consumers are probably unaware it's an issue. But the fact is that it's a significant problem. Liners, for instance, make up an estimated 35% of an unprinted label construction. It's material that serves no purpose once a label is applied and typically ends up in landfills.

New solutions, such as direct thermal linerless labels, are designed to help address this issue. These label constructions feature a silicone coating on the facestock that ensures each layer of self-wound labels won't stick to the layer underneath. This, in turn, eliminates the need for a liner.

Eliminating liners means no liner waste, of course. It also helps end-users lower their disposal costs and reduce their safety risks — no more slippery liner waste piling up on the floor. Liner elimination can also allow up to 50 percent more labels per roll, reducing the time devoted to changeovers and increasing productivity.

Choose label materials with recycled content

Another way converters can help advance the circular packaging economy is to choose label materials made with recycled content. More and more recycled content options, including facestocks, overlaminates, and liners, are now available. Today, converters can choose everything from direct thermal papers to film facestocks with a range of PCW materials included.

As one example, the Wine and Spirits industry has embraced labels with recycled content. Many brands are even choosing facestocks made with materials such as hemp fiber, stone, cotton, or organic waste. Such materials give brands a compelling story to tell while giving consumers another reason to feel even better about their favorite potent potables. All of these materials deliver the levels of performance and shelf appeal that these brands require to stand out in a crowded market. We can expect to see recycled content make its way into more label materials in the future.

Taking recycled content a step further, recycled PET plastic (rPET) has emerged as a valuable and sustainable material for use with overlaminates and label liners. rPET can be recycled multiple times into new packaging, thus providing sustainability benefits over and over again. Even better, these materials make no compromise when it comes to converting performance or visual appeal.

Help brands make more sustainable design choices

Another opportunity to help advance the circular economy is to ensure brands understand the sustainable solutions at their disposal.

In the label and packaging value chain, converters can play both a production role and an advisory role. They're often positioned at a critical point between the brand owner and the label material manufacturer. They keenly understand their own capabilities, the brand's needs, and the manufacturer's offerings.

It's vital for converters to embrace that advisory role. They can help packaging designers and packaging engineers understand their material options. Converters can also guide brands to create packaging that uses less virgin material, less material overall, and is easy to recycle — all while delivering the performance needed to reach and engage with consumers.

Converters can also educate brands on ways to better quantify their sustainability efforts. Many brands are, for example, working with independent organizations such as Carbon Trust. These partnerships help brands not only reduce their carbon footprint but communicate their sustainability efforts to consumers in ways that are more transparent and trustworthy than ever before.

Foster consumer education and awareness

Most Americans want to recycle, and most communities have curbside recycling programs. But many also report being confused about what can be recycled and how to do it. According to a 2021 survey by Republic Services, 59% of respondents correctly identified that hard plastics should go in the recycling bin. However, 61% of respondents incorrectly believed flexible plastics could be recycled. Part of this confusion likely stems from messaging. The How 2 Recycle initiative addresses this by creating a "clear, well-understood, and nationally harmonized label that enables companies to convey to consumers how to recycle a package." Converters and brands are encouraged to become members and adopt the program's communication standards for their product labeling.

Label converters can also work with their customers to seek recognition for their labels by the Association of Plastic Recyclers (APR). APR can recognize a label construction's compatibility with plastic recycling methods, providing guidance for each label design feature, including facestock, adhesive, and ink. If each feature passes the standards outlined in the APR Design Guide, the construction can be submitted for APR certification.

While a growing number of materials are available from label material suppliers that have received APR recognition, converters and brands should work together to get the converted label construction recognized. By doing so, brands have more opportunity to promote recycling of their packaging to consumers and get help from organizations like How2Recycle.

Explore how linerless labels can help your logistics business

Efforts to create a circular economy and a more sustainable world have come a long way in recent decades. But the coming years will be critical. There's a real sense that the clock is ticking toward a time when actions we take (or don't take) can no longer positively affect our environment. It's therefore imperative that more brands adopt labels and packaging today that enables a circular economy. Label converters have an opportunity to help build this more sustainable future.

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