

Case Study

Lebensbaum

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Switching to Plastic to
Boost Sustainability?



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Companies are against the clock to make their packaging more sustainable if they are to comply with the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR). The public often views paper and glass as particularly sustainable materials, but this is not always the case. Lebensbaum shows that the environmental assessment of packaging needs to be more nuanced: by switching from a paper-based shaker to a plastic solution, the company is improving the recyclability of its packaging and laying an important foundation for meeting future requirements.

Sustainable Packaging: A Conflict of Objectives

Food manufacturers face a conflict of objectives when it comes to packaging: on the one hand, they must meet high standards for product protection, quality and food safety; on the other, they face growing pressure to make packaging as sustainable and recyclable as possible. This conflict is also being driven by the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), which sets out new standards for packaging design and aims to promote the circular economy. For example, by 2030, at least 70 per cent of packaging must be recyclable.

For the organic producer Lebensbaum, sustainable packaging management has long been standard practice and its packaging is regularly assessed against the company's own guidelines. These include criteria such as product protection, avoidance of critical substances, recyclability, material efficiency, use of recycled materials, life cycle assessment and carbon footprint. In practice, however, these criteria often conflict with one another and cannot be optimised simultaneously.

„Customers have an intuitive sense of what is sustainable, and plastic isn't part of that. The fact is, however, that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of which packaging material is the most sustainable.“

Lena Mohrlüder, Sustainability Officer Lebensbaum

The Result: A Plastic Container

As recyclability is at the heart of Lebensbaum's sustainable packaging design, a strategic decision was made in favour of a plastic solution. While the plastic container does perform better in terms of material efficiency, the overall life cycle assessment and carbon footprint are worse.

Profile Lebensbaum

Headquarters: Diepholz and Gronau

Employees: ≈ 200

Turnover in 2024: €74 million (2024)

Founded: 1979

Sales: [> 90 % in Deutschland]

Core offering: organic tea, organic coffee and organic spices



Measures & Objectives

The cardboard-wrapped tins used to date were made from a mix of materials including cardboard, aluminium, tinplate and plastic. As these materials are virtually impossible for consumers to separate, recycling was not possible.

Objective:

- An alternative with high recyclability that also meets product protection and food safety requirements
- Early consideration of PPWR requirements

On the Right Track Thanks to Data

This example illustrates that, when optimising packaging, it is difficult to meet all sustainability criteria, and decisions must be made on the basis of transparent data. Sustainability reporting provides the data foundation to highlight conflicting objectives and make impacts and progress measurable. At the same time, it increases the incentive to drive further improvements and systematically promote the sustainable development of business practices.

“Sustainability reporting provides the data foundation for identifying conflicting objectives and making genuine progress measurable.”

Lena Mohrlüder, Sustainability Officer Lebensbaum



Challenges & Investments

- Initially, a single-material plastic can was developed which achieved a recyclability rate of 99 per cent. However, the newly introduced can failed in practical testing.
- The alternative for better handling was a can consisting of two plastic components instead of a single-plastic solution. This has a (slightly) lower recyclability rate.
- Packaging adjustments and material changes require lengthy development and implementation periods. Political uncertainty poses a risk here: certain requirements of the PPWR have not yet been fully specified, meaning that companies can only assess their future options step by step.



Why Was It Worth It?

The plastic solution is significantly easier to recycle than the original version.

- The switch is an important step towards meeting the minimum recyclability requirements that will be mandated by the PPWR in future.
- This new solution enables material recovery, which is an important improvement over the previous packaging, whose mixed materials were difficult to recycle in everyday use.



Conclusion & Outlook

The Lebensbaum case shows that the path to more sustainable and, at the same time, regulatory-compliant packaging solutions is rarely straightforward. Progress in one area does not automatically lead to improvements in all others. Sustainability reporting provides the framework for identifying conflicting objectives and pinpointing where optimisation is needed.

The company is calling on policymakers to introduce ambitious yet practical sustainability regulations. This includes clear and unambiguous legal texts, the early publication of implementing acts, and realistic implementation deadlines. Only under these conditions can small and medium-sized enterprises plan their transition effectively and investment in new packaging solutions with confidence.