



Recyclability

Many customers prefer to receive packaging that is easier to recycle, so packaging designers and engineers often consider recyclability to be an important factor in packaging selection. Conversely, packages that are difficult to recycle are viewed less favorably. Given the choice between recycling waste packaging and disposing of it in a landfill, recycling is typically the environmentally preferable choice. Recycling, in most cases, conserves energy, reduces a host of air and water pollutants (including greenhouse gases), and can reduce virgin material use and associated habitat impacts.

When designing a packaging for recyclability, there are some important factors to consider:

Single material vs. multi-material. Packaging made from a single material is typically much easier to recycle than packaging made from multiple materials (such as plastic laminated paperboard). If multiple materials are used, they should (ideally) be easily separated by the end-user in order to facilitate recycling, or should be designed so that they separate in the recycling process (in the pulper, etc.) without negatively impacting manufacturing operations.

“Technically recyclable” is not the same as “practically recyclable”. Just because a packaging material features the recycling logo, or the manufacturer claims that it is recyclable, does not guarantee that it will be easy or even feasible for your customers to recycle it.

Many packaging materials are “technically recyclable”, that is, processes and technologies exist to recycle them. However, fewer materials are practically recyclable. To be practically recyclable:

- recycling opportunities have to be convenient for waste generators,
- the recycling process must produce materials for which a commercially viable end-use market exists, and
- the entire process has to be economically self-sustaining (or financially supported by industry and/or government).

So for example, polyurethane foam is technically recyclable. But many consumers will have a difficult time finding someplace to accept it. In contrast, corrugated cardboard is recycled in large quantities in many communities.

Not all areas of the U.S. are the same. Just because a material is readily recyclable in your region of the U.S. doesn't guarantee that it is practically recyclable throughout the country. If you are shipping to multiple regions of the U.S. and/or export markets, you may wish to research recycling opportunities in your key markets.

Business and household recycling opportunities may differ. Businesses, who generate larger quantities of packaging waste and may be able to take advantage of back-haul opportunities, typically find it easier to recycle than households. Households in many rural areas as well as some larger cities may not have curbside collection, and most curbside programs accept only a limited range of material types.

Labeling can support recycling – but be careful to avoid misleading claims. Labeling your packaging with information can support recycling. For example, you might want to note a resin ID code, or a toll-free number encouraging customers to

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call to identify recycling opportunities. However, be aware that the Federal Trade Commission will enforce against [environmental marketing claims](#) that are deceptive.

Balance recyclability with other environmental considerations. While the recyclability of a package is an important environmental consideration, thought should be given to other criteria as well. In fact, recycling is a lower priority for many businesses and governments than waste prevention (using less packaging). Sometimes, using a non-recyclable material may have environmental advantages over an easy-to-recycle material, particularly if the non-recyclable material weighs considerably less. [Click here](#) for an example. Other options to consider include [reusable transport packaging](#) and [using recycled content](#).

Other ways manufacturers and producers can support recycling:

Besides choosing materials that are easy to recycle, and educating consumers about recycling opportunities, other ways that producers can support recycling include the following:

- Accept returned packaging wastes from customers, or make arrangements for someone else to.
- Link your customers with the recycler of your internal scrap.
- Support recycling markets by [using post-consumer recycled content](#) in your own packaging.

Increasingly, the manufacturers and designers of packaging (and products) are being asked to share in the responsibility for reducing environmental impacts over the life of their packaging. This concept is also referred to as Product Stewardship or Extended Producer Responsibility. Businesses shipping to foreign markets should also be aware of the many [environmental packaging laws](#) abroad.

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