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Packagers Matter in the Sustainability Game

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Published: July 29th, 2014 [Industry News](#) [1] [Sustainability](#) [2]

[3]

Eco-friendliness and safety of processes, goods, and services throughout a global supply chain can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

**By Todd Cort, Director of Sustainability Services, North America
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When it comes to sustainability, pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturers have long been in the spotlight, with a device or drug itself attracting more attention than its packaging. However, sustainability efforts of the packagers have also come to light thanks, in part, to the commitment and leadership from some of the largest customers of the sector, including GlaxoSmithKline, Merck & Co., and Johnson & Johnson. Increasing expectations from customers and investors, combined with the commitment of the packaging companies themselves, are driving improvement across the pharmaceutical and medical device value chains.

There are many ways for a company to manage sustainability issues and support its claims through environmental standards compliance. Eco-friendliness and safety of processes, goods, and services throughout a global supply chain network can be accomplished and certified in the following areas:

Packaging as product: Chemical testing and recognized green mark certifications guarantee that companies minimize the risk of harm by delivering safe and nontoxic packaging.

Lifecycle: Packagers define, assess, and communicate product sustainability to understand the major impacts of the product through its entire lifecycle: from product sourcing, design, and manufacture to transportation, use, and disposal/recycling.

Systems: The implementation of green management systems offers businesses a chance to conduct its operations in an environmentally responsible way.

Building: A shift is taking place in the way companies design, build, furnish, operate, maintain, renovate, and deconstruct work structures.

While many businesses look at sustainability from an enterprise-wide risk management perspective, one of the most effective frameworks for working with sustainability issues in the packaging industry is to take a lifecycle analysis approach to sustainability risk identification. This perspective illuminates many significant sustainability challenges facing the sector.

On the supplier side, packaging can be sourced from a wide range of basic resources from

petrochemicals to animal products. Each carries its own set of sustainability challenges, such as animal welfare, sustainable agriculture and forestry, and inherent energy costs in chemical-based packaging. Within the company operations are all of the typical sustainability challenges of a light manufacturer, including employee safety and development and energy and water conservation.

The packaging sector is an inherent player in global logistics and so the products from the sector must pay special attention to weight and energy of shipping while maintaining quality and effectiveness of the packaging itself.

At the end of life, packaging of pharmaceutical and medical devices must abide by the same principles as pharmaceutical and medical device companies: recyclability and durability for shipping packaging and breakdown of chemical constituents from applications such as gel caps. Customers want to be able to recycle a box in which a medication came in, and they want ingested gel caps to break down without polluting streams.

Suppliers to the sector—agriculture, forestry, animal products, and chemicals companies—are moving quickly with their sustainability efforts. Pharmaceutical and medical device packaging companies that are not yet active in sustainability have an opportunity to move rapidly up the learning curve. They can closely work with these suppliers through more formalized supplier engagement practices, add sustainability criteria to supplier code of conduct or supplier scorecard systems, or conduct “mutual learning audits” to understand and improve processes in the supply chain.

While packagers step up their sustainability efforts, they must preserve the packaging performance function and ensure that it adequately delivers and protects contents and communicates user information. These aspects are highly regulated and controlled with the help of auditing and certification bodies. More and more, companies are also looking to the trusted third-party companies to assist in improving sustainability attributes of the packaging strategy.

Todd Cort brings a detailed, process-oriented approach to the TÜV Rheinland advisory services fostered during his Ph.D. studies in Civil/Environmental Engineering and subsequent research at the Colorado School of Mines. He is a Certified Professional Engineer in the State of California and the only Lead Certified Sustainability Practitioner (Lead CSAP) against the AA1000AS in the US.

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