

Editor's note: Disruption isn't a bad thing. It can be positive — causing retail grocers to get out of their comfort zones. Disruption, even when there's upheaval, can force retailers to go back to the drawing board to implement new strategies to preserve their businesses. Disruption is challenging, but to discount it is to put your proverbial head in the sand. In the next several weeks, Store Brands identifies five current disruptors impacting private brands. Part two of the series.

As consumers continue to learn more about it, sustainability continues to disrupt the grocery sector. As concerns about the environment increase, the connection between sustainability and consumer purchase decisions is growing stronger.

Food industry analyst and researcher The Hartman Group says in its ["Sustainability 2017" report](#) that consumer awareness of sustainability is growing dramatically — in 2008, 56 percent of consumers said they were familiar with the term "sustainability"; in 2017, 83 percent of consumers said they were familiar with it. In the report, The Hartman Group states that "packaging is integral to sustainability in terms of both materials and packaging's role in communicating sustainability practices and product information to the consumer."

According to a recent Nielsen study, "Fad or Fundamental," 68 percent of Americans said it's important that companies implement programs to improve the environment, and 67 percent of Americans said they will prioritize healthy or socially conscious food purchases in 2018. Forty-eight percent said they will change their consumption habits to reduce their impact on the environment.

According to the the 2017 Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute's (PMMI) state of the industry report, growing attention to depletion of natural resources has driven demand for environmentally friendly solutions from leading companies, which has increased the focus on optimizing machinery.

"There has been an increased use of recycled materials over the last decade. Recently, the trend has strengthened as the balance in importance between lowest cost and sustainability has shifted slightly back to sustainability," the report says.

Lakeland, Fla.-based Publix Super Markets says it is making sustainability work in its financial favor. On its website, Publix said it eliminated 35 million separate date, price and product description labels by consolidating this information onto a single-scale label that acts as a security seal on the packaging, which reduces the chance of product spillage.

"We worked with our film supplier to identify a more sustainable sealing material for our deli salads, and we implemented a new film made from 30 percent post-consumer recycled material," Publix states on its website.

As a result of the change, Publix said it saved 92,000 labor hours, allowing its deli employees more time for what's really important: its customers.

Publix also said it is reducing resource usage. In one case, by working with its supplier, Publix reduced 19,000 pounds of plastic by converting from a 2.5-gallon container of cleaning solution to a 1.5-gallon container of ultra-concentrated core cleaning and sanitation chemicals.

Cincinnati-based The Kroger Co. announced late last year that it had joined the Sustainable Packaging Coalition (SPC), a membership-based collaborative of like-minded companies striving to advance sustainable packaging. As part of its 2020 Sustainability Goals, Kroger has committed to optimizing 100 percent of Our Brands private-branded products packaging by increasing recyclability, reducing excess packaging and increasing certified virgin fiber sourcing, among other things, during the next three years.

Market research agency Mintel recently announced several trends that will impact the global packaging industry this year. Not only will packaging play a pivotal role in reducing global food and product waste, according to Mintel, but also brands that adopt clear and succinct sustainable package messaging will be rewarded as consumers prefer brands that embrace minimalism.

Sustainability takes education

Alpha Packaging is committed to sustainability. The St. Louis-based company manufactures a variety of high-quality plastic bottles made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which can be recycled. Alpha Packaging can also incorporate post-consumer PET into the fabrication process.

Marny Bielefeldt, Alpha Packaging's vice president of marketing, says the company keeps consumer products companies educated about the sustainability options available to them, including the pros and cons of each option.

"You may want to use a corn-based bioresin, but that bottle is not going to be recyclable in the existing PET and HDPE recycling streams," she explains. "You have the positive aspect of choosing a renewable resource, but the negative aspect of a bottle that can't be recycled in most curbside recycling programs."

When Alpha Packaging first started working with brands that wanted sustainable packaging solutions about 10 years ago, there was an expectation that recycled packaging would be less expensive than virgin plastic since it had already been turned into plastic once, Bielefeldt says. And while consumers wanted to be eco-friendly with their purchases, they didn't want to pay more for products that supported that philosophy.

"Now we see that both brand owners and consumers understand that eco-friendly packaging is a commitment to a certain lifestyle, and they seem willing to invest a small bit more to stand behind their philosophy," Bielefeldt says.

Retailers can also help educate consumers about the different eco-friendly attributes of sustainable packaging in their stores, Bielefeldt says.

“They can help consumers understand the difference between ‘recycled,’ ‘recyclable,’ ‘compostable’ and ‘biodegradable.’ Each word means something different, and when consumers understand which choice they are making with their dollars, they will become even more supportive and willing to invest in sustainable packaging initiatives,” she notes.