

Back to school for eco-conscious design professionals

There may be no 'magic bullet' material or technique to guarantee packaging sustainability, but considering sustainability as early as possible in the packaging design process is a good start, as **Roland Tellzen** learned when he attended design agency Boxer & Co's Sustainability 101 event.

For a chilly winter Sydney weeknight, the turnout at design agency Boxer & Co's recent "Sustainability 101" event at Vella Nero cafe certainly showed the value the packaging design community places on green issues.

Boxer's client service director, Gwen Blake, kicked off proceedings by acknowledging that packaging does not enjoy high environmental regard among the general population.

Similarly, she said, sustainability issues in packaging are not yet given the attention they warrant, but she believes the tide is turning.

"If it is not considered important by players at the moment, it will become important down the line," she said, noting that the packaging design community had a vital role in embedding sustainability within the design process.

"Some 70 per cent of the environmental impact of an overall product is determined in the design stage. So, it is important when you begin to produce a pack, you need to start talking about and considering sustainability early and often," Blake said.

Having set the tone for the evening, Blake then handed over proceedings to the night's star speaker – design

professional, author, sustainability expert, and self-described 'style queen', Lisa Heinze.

Revealing that she became involved in packaging sustainability when drinking a takeaway coffee – and realising the cup wasn't recyclable – Heinze said modern consumption patterns meant sustainability was destined to be an absolutely vital aspect of the future packaging chain.

"If everyone lived the way Australians did, we would need four planets' worth of resources to keep us going the way we are consuming. That's not realistic, and means we have to invest in closed loop resources in the packaging cycle," she said.

"Each Australian generates 90 kilos of packaging waste a year, and about two-thirds of that is grocery waste. And even if a lot of it is recyclable, it is not getting recycled at the rate it should be," she went on.

And even with many consumers more willing than ever to sort their recyclable packaging waste, packaging is often portrayed as an environmental villain.

"Packaging just gets a bad rap, and not just that, consumers are confused about how recyclable packaging is as well," Heinze said.

"More than a quarter of people think there is not enough environmental information on packaging."



Sustainability 101: A pack's environmental impact is determined at design stage.

On the plus side, however, she said there is a growing market segment keen to use more sustainable packaging – and willing to pay a premium even up to 20 per cent more on standard prices to do so as well. This demographic is characterised by a high proportion of middle-to-high income earners in professional roles, and has nearly doubled in numbers over the past four years alone.

But it is not just a sea-change in consumer attitudes that is driving sustainability, Heinze said. It also offers material and commercial benefits to business as well.

"There are also cost savings involved. If you use less packaging, it means lower material costs, lower transport costs, lower warehouse costs and so on," she said. "Coca-Cola, for example, in 2010 saved \$US90 million by reducing their packaging waste. A lot of that was by making the packaging lighter, and they also saved \$US5 million alone by using shorter closures."

There is no magic bullet material that solves all environmental problems about packaging – everything from glass to plastic to paper to new biohybrids and bioplastics has environmental advantages and disadvantages – but all could help produce better and more sustainable packaging if considered right from the start of the design process, she said.

"The key is to think sustainable early, and think sustainable often," Heinze concluded.



ABOVE: Sustainable packs on show at Sustainability 101. RIGHT: Lisa Heinze (left) and Boxer & Co's Gwen Blake.

