

Food Industry Drags Its Heels On Recyclable And Compostable Packaging

Eliza Barclay | Jan. 29, 2015



Environmental groups cited Wendy's as "Poor" in the area of packaging sustainability. One reason is that the chain still uses black plastic bowls, which cannot be recycled. *Lynne Sladky/AP*

this problem. There's a big onus on the makers of packaged foods and beverages to reduce plastic and paper waste and also make it easier for us to recycle and compost the materials we use.

"What are companies doing to show that they have a personal and financial responsibility to promote recycling? [We found] relatively weak examples of leadership," Andrew Behar, CEO of [As You Sow](#), a group that promotes environmental and social corporate responsibility, told reporters Thursday. "This industry has a long way to go."

The two NGOs surveyed and analyzed 47 companies based on what they call the "four pillars of packaging sustainability": source reduction, or switching to reusable packaging; recycled content; recyclability and materials use; and boosting materials recycling. None of the 47 companies, which included big players in fast food, beverages and groceries, earned the report's highest "Best Practices" status.

Only two companies — Starbucks and McDonald's — got the nod for "Better Practices." And eight companies — Arby's, Quiznos, Burger King, Wendy's, Jack in the Box, Dairy Queen, Domino's Pizza and Papa John's Pizza — got the "Poor" designation for showing little to no leadership on packaging sustainability, based on information they make public.

Starbucks got top marks for using 10 percent post-consumer recycled content in coffee cups, offering to serve its drinks in reusable mugs, and switching the material in its cold beverage plastic cups to one that produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions. The report applauded McDonald's for using 33 percent post-consumer recycled content in its paper sandwich boxes, reducing the weight of its packaging and pledging to phase out foam cups, a common form of beach debris that breaks down into pellets that can kill animals.

Let's face it: We are people who consume many of our meals on the go. That means we're not eating on real plates or bowls but out of plastic containers and paper boxes. And perhaps daily, we drink our coffees and sodas out of plastic or plastic-lined paper cups.

Overall, Americans recycle at the lamentable rate of 34.5 percent and recycle plastic packaging at the even measlier rate of 14 percent. So the majority of that food packaging is ending up in landfills, or on the street as litter, where it may eventually get swept into the ocean. There, our wrappers and cans and cups become a much bigger problem — a direct threat to marine life that may ingest it and die.

According to a report published Thursday by the environmental groups [As You Sow](#) and the Natural Resources Defense Council, most of the major players in the restaurant and beverage industry are not doing a whole lot to ameliorate

The report's authors note that governments and consumers need to continue to pressure the food industry to make more of this kind of progress in the area of food packaging. But that may be hard for consumers who've become increasingly confused as packaging has gotten more complex, Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist and project editor of the packaging report for the NRDC, told reporters.

"It's still confusing for consumers to look at the triangle on the bottom of plastic" containers and know whether something is recyclable, she says. "So I think there is a call for companies to make these materials more readily understandable."

Restaurants, in particular, also have a huge opportunity to help promote recycling by making it easy and accessible in the "front of the house."

The British-owned chain Pret A Manger, which has only 60 stores in the U.S., is the only chain in the country to offer recycling and composting for customers. The report notes that many chains don't offer recycling on-site because people take their food — and the packages — home.

But two major cities, San Francisco and Seattle, have enacted ordinances requiring recycling and composting bins at all businesses. Such measures show that it can be done — and it can help reduce waste significantly, the report notes.



Starbucks uses 10 percent postconsumer recycled content in its paper cups, which environmental groups say is a step in the right direction for packaging sustainability.

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