

The Age of Circular Packaging: The Recycling Bin Isn't Going to Cut it Anymore

Today, about 40% of global plastic waste comes from packaging. But what if there was a way that packaging didn't have to become waste at all?

Humans toss out 141 million tons of plastic packaging a year, leaving large corporations at the center of the planet's fate, as they manufacture and distribute the plastic products that end up in the hands of consumers. But it takes just one sustainability practice to completely transform the items that line grocery shelves and are discarded each and every day.

In 2018, Coca-Cola launched its **World Without Waste** strategy, making a formal commitment to end plastic waste and usher in a new era of sustainability centered around circular packaging.

The goal of our circular economy is to design packaging that can be recycled and reused. By keeping global plastic waste and carbon emissions low, this system ensures recycled packaging is collected, processed, and revitalized into new materials, such as bottles made from recycled PET (rPET).

By 2035, we aim to use 35% to 40% recycled material in primary packaging and ensure that 70% to 75% of the bottles and cans we introduce each year are collected.

However, building a circular economy means more than just a change in practice, but a change in mindset. Consumers and corporations must work in tandem, dancing in a never-ending rhythm toward a more sustainable, zero-waste future.

For most consumers, they've been taught the importance of placing plastic bottles and containers into their very own blue bin. Corporations are happy because they've stamped their product with the three green arrows, and the consumer is happy because they've tossed that

very same product into the very important recycling bin. Their job is done. They can give themselves a pat on the back and go about their everyday lives.

But that simply isn't enough anymore. Corporations and consumers must view their packaging as more than just a linear lifespan, but instead, as something that has the potential to live on in the next product that gets placed on shelves.

Coca-Cola operates in more than 200 countries, with more than 950 production facilities and 200 bottling partners globally. As the world's largest nonalcoholic beverage company, we are living proof that this system works, leaving no excuse for other companies not to follow suit. Over the past few years, our global initiatives have reflected what the age of circular packaging might look like for organizations around the world:

- **Nigeria:** We opened our first company-owned packaging collection center. Once fully operational, the hub is expected to collect and process up to 13,000 metric tons of PET bottles annually.
- **Italy:** We launched our first circular packaging campus. With new dispensers and reusable containers, students experienced "packageless" drinks made in a full bottle-to-bottle process using 100% rPET – excluding caps and labels. The bottles are collected through reverse vending machines, then recycled into flakes and sent to an rPET production facility.
- **Poland, Serbia, Croatia, Romania and Nigeria:** We tested a water-based adhesive that bonds pallet layers and eliminates the need for corrugated layer pads, saving roughly 2,000 tons of cardboard packaging.
- **Italy and Poland:** We introduced shrink film made entirely from post-consumer recycled material.

While we are proud of our progress, we know there is still so much more work to do. True success will come when other companies also go beyond making their packaging recyclable and begin exploring how recycled materials can be integrated into every stage of production.

The journey of a beverage bottle shouldn't end when it's tossed in the bin. Every end in a consumer's hand should only be the start of its infinite beginnings. Because the future of packaging is here – and it's circular.

In 2010, for the first time ever, Coca-Cola established a clear sustainability strategy. Since then, the brand has put sustainability at the forefront of its messaging, implementing responsible practices and setting tangible environmental goals.

This thought leadership piece seeks to highlight a sustainability initiative that has served the Coca-Cola Co. well in recent years: circular packaging. In promoting this practice, the company takes a strong stance that plastic waste never has to be wasted at all, and that making items recyclable is only a starting point for true sustainability.

By promoting the age of circular packaging and encouraging other companies to follow suit, the brand demonstrates that its sustainability efforts go beyond strengthening its reputation to driving global impact.

**Refer to citation page for references.*