

Here's why (and how) your brand should move toward more sustainable labels



Your brand is likely facing immense pressure to step up your sustainability game:

- **Major retailers** like Target, Walmart and Kroger have imminent sustainability requirements for their suppliers.
- **Investors** have a heightened focus on the environmental, social and governance (ESG) measures of the companies in their portfolios.

- **Customer scrutiny** misses nothing.

While “sustainability” as a strategic initiative encompasses much more than packaging (social, economic and environmental factors must all be considered), packaging is the one touchpoint all consumers, value chain partners, investors and retailers will see.

And what they’re looking for isn’t a vague, greenwashed message about how great your packaging is for the environment.

When we use the term “sustainable packaging,” we’re really talking about an umbrella of packaging categories that can be tied to an unambiguous environmental benefit. Lightweighting, recyclability, compostability and other specific ways to reduce the burden your packaging places on the environment.

Sustainable packaging is a complex topic — entire books have been written on the subject.

This isn’t a book.

It’s a quick “how-to” manual for brands looking for actionable steps they can take today to switch to more sustainable labels. We’ll first detail why sustainability is important, and then we’ll address how to overcome five common obstacles to sustainable labeling initiatives.

The cost of not factoring sustainability into packaging and label design



With decisions about your brand, all roads lead back to the customer. 34% of baby boomers, 46% of Gen Xers and 75% of millennials “definitely or probably will change their purchase/consumption habits to reduce [their] impact on the environment,” [according to research from Nielsen](#).

The trend here is obvious: Customers care about sustainability, and the younger the customer, the more they care. As time goes on, the purchasing power and, therefore, leverage of younger generations will only grow. Many large corporations are already implementing strategies to address this — so this is a trend that will eventually affect mid-sized brands as well.

As the demand for sustainability picks up steam, there’s an important decision some brands might still need to make: When a retailer, investor or consumer picks up my product ...

- ... do I want them to see my packaging and labels as a seamless extension of my brand's commitment to sustainability in all aspects of our business?
- ... or do I want them to see discrepancies in how my company talks about sustainability, and how we package and label our products?

Not deciding is a decision in itself, as your label is the face of your brand in the marketplace. Consumers are already beginning to stop picking up less-than-eco-friendly products. And as this trend continues, nothing is guaranteed, not even survival.

5 obstacles to sustainable labeling initiatives — and how to overcome them

Brands have many motivations for postponing sustainable packaging and labeling initiatives:

1. **“I don’t even know where to start.** With so many packaging options to choose from (recyclable, responsibly sourced, etc.) how will I know what’s best for my brand and my sustainability goals?”
2. **“I have a recyclable bottle already.** Do I even need to consider the recyclability of my label?”
3. **“Sustainable label materials will be too expensive.** To stay at our current price point, we need to stick with what we’re currently using.”
4. **“I don’t want to disrupt our supply chain.** Our current label materials have always arrived on time, and with pressures from retail chains for on-time deliveries, I don’t want to take the risk of switching materials.”
5. **“Will I be able to achieve my brand vision with more sustainable materials?** I don’t want to sacrifice product differentiation on the shelf.”

Let’s go through these obstacles one by one, explaining your options, linking to resources for further research and listing out small things you can do *today* to build momentum.

1. Want more sustainable labels? Start here.

Labels aren’t really “sustainable.” They’re recyclable, recycled, responsibly sourced, compostable or lightweight.

And each of those subcategories tells a very different story about your label and your brand:

- **Recyclable labels** are designed with municipal recyclability in mind, as are all other components of your package (bottle, cap, lid, etc.). To help consumers, your labels should be clearly marked as recyclable, along with instructions for how consumers can prep your package for recycling. (We’ll discuss recyclability in greater detail later in this article).
- **Recycled label materials** are made from post-consumer waste (consumer waste that is diverted from the landfill and recycled) or pre-consumer waste (manufacturing waste diverted from the landfill and recycled). It doesn’t just have to be paper or plastic. Recycled label materials can be made from [cotton](#), [grapes](#), [barley](#) and other natural materials
- **Responsibly sourced** materials are made from renewable resources and are often certified by an independent third party. For example, [facestocks bearing the Forest Stewardship Council® \(FSC\)](#) stamp of approval would fall neatly under this category.
- **Compostable labels** are designed to break down, along with all other components in your package, in an industrial composting facility. Few locations in the U.S. have curbside collection for compostable products, so these label materials may not be the best choice in all situations.
- **Lightweight, or thin, label materials** are designed to use much less material than conventional labels. These materials promise a much smaller carbon footprint: Because

thinner labels are lighter, less gas is consumed when shipping them. Your label supplier will work with you on how light you can go, as you'll still need a label that will withstand wear and tear during shipping and product use.

You should begin your sustainable label initiatives by asking yourself, "Which of the above benefits best aligns with my brand's sustainability story and goals? Which of the above benefits is realistic if I take into account how my product is produced and used?"

When in doubt, let the experts guide you through these questions. They've done it for other brands and can help you consider this decision from every angle, and throughout the entire product lifecycle.

For example, let's say you're dead set on compostable labels. And yes, it might seem like the perfect solution for your brand ... until you realize most of your customers don't have access to curbside compost pickup.

If that's the case, the compostable packages you worked so hard to design might end up in a landfill anyway. An easier drop-in solution to enhance the sustainability of your packaging might be to switch to a lighter label material.

How to get started today

- **Ask yourself:** "Which of the above benefits best aligns with my brand's sustainability story and goals?"
- **Talk to the label experts.** Loop in a label converter to determine which sustainable label materials would work best for your product and brand.
- **Skim through the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) Green Guides.** You don't need to commit these rules to memory, but the [examples on pages 5-12 of this document](#) should give you a good idea of how the design of your packaging impacts what "green" marketing claims you can (and cannot) make.
- **Consider your packaging design holistically.** If the rest of your package isn't recyclable, choosing a recyclable label material might not be the best choice. But a lightweight label material might be the perfect drop-in solution.

2. If recyclability is your goal, labels play a bigger role than you think

When designing a package for recyclability, labels are often an afterthought. The problem with that type of thinking is this: Your bottle and cap could be recyclable, but if your label isn't compatible with the recycling process, then your packaging won't get recycled.

[According to label materials supplier Avery Dennison](#), it's "estimated that 560 million bottles are wasted in the recycling process every year, largely due to incompatible label materials."

That's a lot of waste. And it's entirely preventable.

To ensure your entire package is recyclable, make sure you are upfront and clear with all packaging suppliers (labels, containers, caps, lids, etc.) about your goals. They should be able to make recommendations about how their component could be designed to enhance the recyclability of the packaging system.

Narrowing in on labels, there's a wealth of options when it comes to recyclable label materials. One such option would be film or paper labels with [CleanFlake™ adhesive technology](#). Designed for use on PET containers, this strong adhesive stays firmly in place throughout the product lifecycle, and then fully separates from the PET surface (without leaving behind residue) during the recycling process.

How to get started today

- **Talk to your label converter about material options.** They'll recommend the best recyclable label materials for your product container.
- **Check out the Association of Plastic Recyclers' (APR) [guide to plastics recyclability](#).** If you have a PET container, go ahead and give this [label material selection guide from the APR a read](#) as well.
- **[Talk to How2Recycle about joining](#).** If you're serious about making your package recyclable, why not pay the nominal joining fee, go through their recyclability assessment and become a member? Then you can prominently feature their recycling instructions on your label, gain more trust from consumers and ensure your packages actually get recycled.

3. Breaking down the cost of sustainable labels

With labels, there are two ways to look at costs: (1) How much is each label costing me and (2) how much value is this label providing my brand.

Sustainable label materials do, on occasion, cost more than their conventional counterparts. That said, the value they provide in shelf pull, product differentiation and goodwill with consumers can, in some cases, far outweigh the incremental cost increase.

There's no silver bullet sustainability solution where you both save the environment and cut your costs in every single situation.

That said, savings can be realized on the total cost of the package in many situations. For example, say you lightweight your product container — doing so could provide the cost savings that could in turn be used on a more sustainable label or cap. Savings in one area can help another.

But it's important to remember that, regardless of the situation, consumers care deeply about packaging sustainability. 60% of North American consumers are concerned with packaging waste, [according to a Nielsen survey](#).

And consumers are increasingly taking that concern to the checkout counter:

- “In more than 90% of CPG categories, sustainability-marketed products grew faster than their conventional counterparts.” – [Harvard Business Review](#)
- “73% of consumers say they would definitely or probably change their consumption habits to reduce their impact on the environment.” – [Nielsen](#)
- “66% of global consumers say they’re willing to pay more for sustainable offerings ... 73% of millennials are.” – [Nielsen](#) in 2015. These trends were obvious five years ago and are only becoming more prevalent over time.

Soon, sustainable packaging will no longer be a differentiator. It’ll simply be the price of entry.

How to get started today

- **Start today and start small.** Not every sustainable packaging solution needs to be “game-changing” or “revolutionary.” And sustainability doesn’t have to break the bank. Simply switching to a responsibly sourced, FSC®-certified material is a quick, plug-and-play way to enhance the sustainability of your packaging.
- **Ask your label supplier,** “What is the smallest, lowest cost thing I could start doing that would have a noticeable impact on the sustainability of my labels?”

4. Building a sound, sustainable supply chain

Many brands are concerned that switching materials will negatively impact their supply chain. And understandably so — they’re under immense pressure to meet their retailer partners’ strict on-time delivery requirements.

To minimize the risk of your material switch, ask pointed questions when selecting new materials.

Here are some questions to ask your label supplier

- “What materials have worked well for brands my size?”
- “Do you have any examples of clients you’ve worked with who have incorporated this material into their supply chain successfully?”
- “What kind of business continuity agreement do you have with your label supplier?”

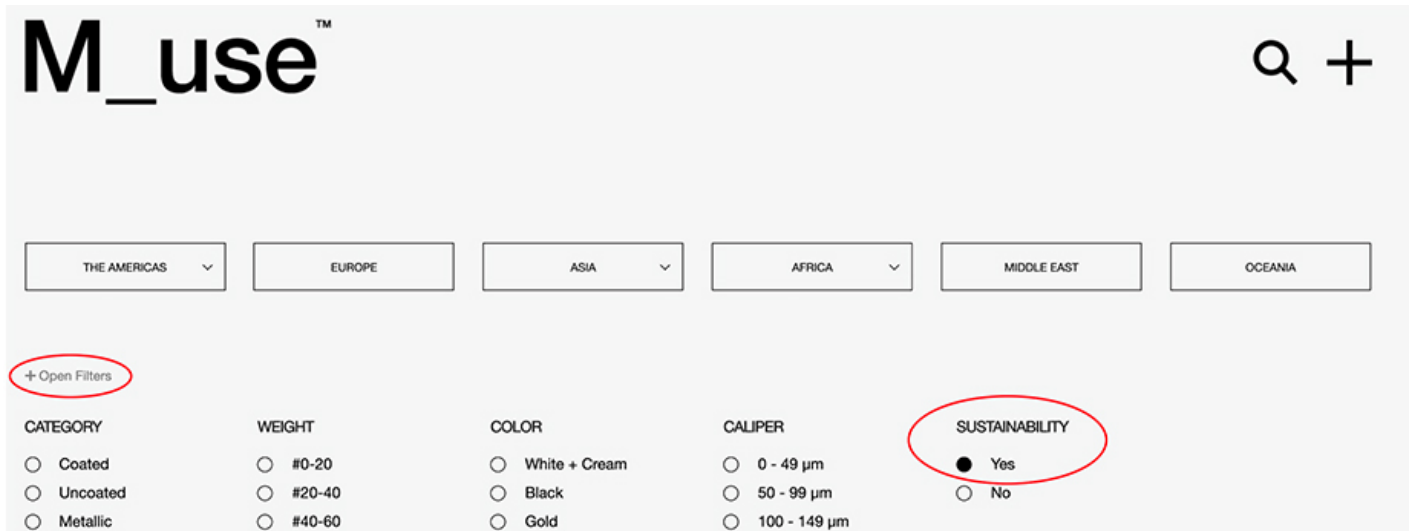
5. Achieving product differentiation with sustainable label materials

Sustainability shouldn’t come at the expense of your brand vision. And with so many high-quality sustainable materials flooding the market each year, it doesn’t have to.

The best way to prove this point isn’t to tell you about all the striking options out there — it’s to show you. Check out the links below to begin exploring all the product-differentiating, sustainable label materials at your fingertips.

How to get started today

- Sift through [this library of label materials](#) from M_use. Make sure to toggle “sustainability” in the filters (see screenshot below). When you find something you like, bring it to your label converter, and they can help you find something that looks similar and will perform well in your product use environment.
- **Not to sound like a broken record** but talk to your label converter. They’ve helped many different brands, with many different preferences and needs, switch to sustainable materials. They can help you, too.



Want to get started?

If you're looking to switch to a more sustainable label material, [let's chat](#). We'll start by discussing your sustainability goals and brand vision and, after evaluating your current label specs, we'll help you and your team narrow in on the right solution for your brand.

Resource Label Group is working through its own multi-year plan to become a more sustainable partner for brands throughout North America. With 17 production facilities, we boast coast-to-coast reach with a local touch. [Reach out today to start a conversation about label sustainability](#).