Six ways to tackle the plastic puzzle in food packaging

More than 8 million tonnes of plastic is used to pack food in Europe alone and the number is growing. Consumers say plastic waste is one of their most pressing environmental concerns and they're urging food companies to reduce or improve packaging. But it's not that simple. Download the full report here

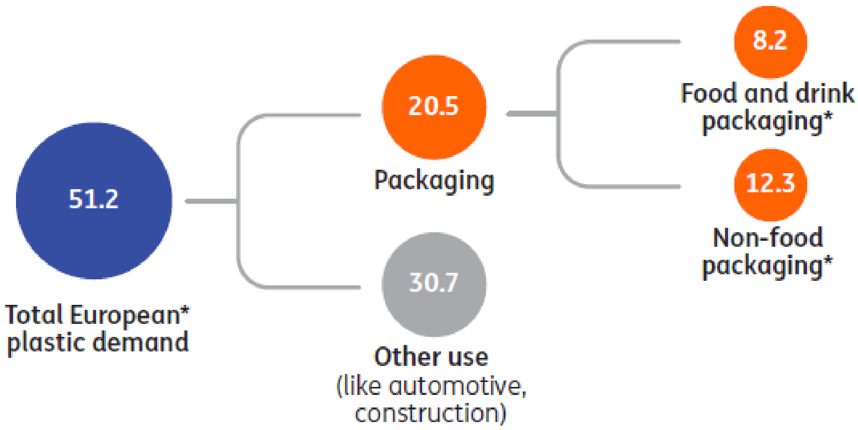
Plastic food packaging equals weight of 6 million cars

Plastic food and drink packaging forms a substantial part of European plastic use. According to calculations made by ING, European companies use over 8 million tonnes of plastic to produce food and drink packaging. This is roughly the weight of 6 million new cars. Plastic is a popular packaging material because it is light, flexible and inexpensive compared to other packaging materials, such as cardboard, can or glass. It also improves food safety and shelf life and offers ease of transport and consumer convenience.

At the same time, plastic packaging contributes to environmental problems as it is made from oil and gas and hardly decays when ending up as litter. Because only part of all plastic waste is recycled, valuable raw materials are lost and the incineration of plastic waste for energy generation leads to CO2 emissions. In Europe, packaging accounts for 60% of all plastic waste and the total amount of plastic packaging waste is growing by 2% each year.

Packaging accounts for a substantial part of the demand for plastic...

Plastic demand by segment, 2018, million metric tonnes



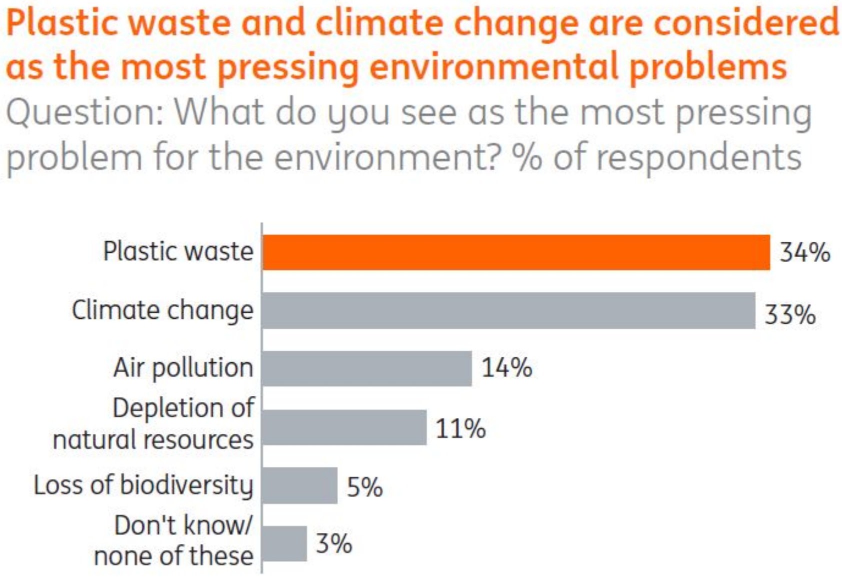
Source: Plastics Europe, Europe is EU28, Norway and Switzerland.

* ING estimates, based on the assumption that 40% of all plastic packaging is used for food and drink packaging

Europeans put plastic waste on a par with climate change

In the eyes of European consumers, plastic waste is one of the most pressing environmental problems, as a recent ING survey among 13.000 international respondents points out. Both plastic waste (34%) and climate change (33%) are considered key problems for the environment while air pollution (14%), depletion of natural resources (11%) and loss of biodiversity (5%) score significantly lower. In the survey, people say they throw away an estimated three pieces of plastics waste daily, which makes it a very tangible problem they face every day.

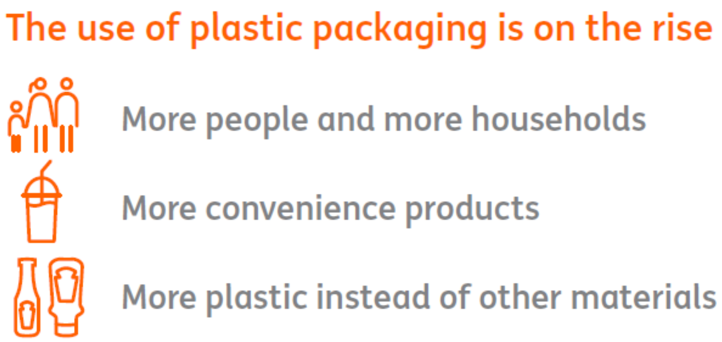
Plastic waste and climate change a top consumer priority



Source: ING International Survey

Plastic food packaging is expected to grow

Paradoxically enough, despite consumer sentiment towards plastic, the total use of plastic food packaging in Europe is expected to increase further in the coming years due to three reasons: First are demographic trends such as population growth and the increase in number of households. Second are trends in consumer behaviour, such as the rise of convenience products like pre-cut fruit and vegetables and products aimed at to-go consumption. Third is that plastic packaging is gaining ground in several areas of the supermarket to prevent food waste or to replace other materials like glass, cans or cardboard.



Six ways to tackle the plastic puzzle

Due to the environmental impact and the negative sentiment among consumers, more and more food manufacturers and retailers are striving for less packaging material and better plastic packaging. ING's research suggests six ways to tackle the problem:

1. lighter packaging, which requires less plastic;
2. the use of recycled material or omitting the packaging altogether;
3. improving recyclability by modifying the packaging and investing in the recycling system;

4. the use of bio-based and biodegradable plastic;
5. more re-useable packaging; and
6. switching to other materials such as cardboard, can or glass.

No one-solution-fits-all There is no one-solution-fits-all, however. Omitting packaging, for example, can lead to food waste and bio-based plastic made from food crops requires more arable land. Cardboard, cans and glass also come with their own environmental challenges and therefore often mean transferring the problem. No single solution is sufficient on its own to remedy the plastic problem making combinations of multiple solutions necessary if food companies want to tackle the plastic puzzle.

This article condenses the main points of our major report, 'Plastic packaging in the food sector; Six ways to tackle the plastic puzzle' which you can download here

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