

How Amazon Has Transformed the Packaging Industry

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Few companies have reshaped modern packaging as dramatically as Amazon. What began as an online bookstore became the world's largest e-commerce engine—and along the way, it forced the entire packaging industry to rethink materials, design, sustainability, and logistics. Today, Amazon's influence reaches every corner of the supply chain, from corrugated mills and resin suppliers to private-label brands and last-mile carriers.

Here's how Amazon has fundamentally changed packaging—as well as where the industry is headed next.

1. The Rise of “Ships in Own Container” (SIOC) Packaging

Before Amazon, retail packaging was mostly about **shelf presence**. Tall boxes, oversized windows, bright graphics—even if the packaging was 80% air—were all meant to catch a shopper's eye.

Amazon flipped the model.

They pushed suppliers toward **SIOC**, where the product ships in its own protective packaging without an Amazon overbox. That changed everything:

- Structural design now matters more than graphic design
- Packaging must withstand ISTA 6-A testing, including drops and compression
- Engineering tolerances became crucial
- Excessive void-fill and oversize boxes are penalized financially

Amazon's Frustration-Free Packaging (FFP) program essentially forced brands to redesign long-ignored products from the inside out, creating a new industry standard for e-commerce durability.

2. New Material Demands: Corrugate, Mailers & Lightweighting

Amazon's scale shifted the entire global material balance:

Corrugated Board

Demand for corrugated exploded, especially during COVID. Mills ran at max capacity. Flute profiles evolved—more B, C, and E flutes optimized for small parcels, not retail displays.

Mailer Expansion

Amazon made padded mailers mainstream. Kraft padded mailers (including paper-based, curbside-recyclable versions) replaced millions of plastic bubble mailers. Their widespread adoption accelerated major investments in lightweight mailer automation.

Lightweighting Pressures

Amazon relentlessly pushes suppliers toward:

- Thinner corrugate
- Lower caliper materials
- Optimized void reduction
- Resin-reduced films for PE mailers

"Every ounce off saves millions" isn't a catchphrase—it's the real economics of Amazon's fulfillment network.

3. Automation Became Mandatory

Amazon's fulfillment centers are built around throughput. That means packaging must run on:

- Automated bagging systems
- High-speed case erectors
- Robotic picking lines
- Automated labeling and sorting equipment

Suppliers were suddenly forced to think like operations engineers, not branding teams. If your packaging can't run on Amazon's automation? It won't scale.

This drove a massive wave of investments in:

- Auto-bag films
- Right-size packaging equipment
- Robotic-compatible formats

- Barcoding and traceability standards

The ripple effect reshaped packaging equipment manufacturers across North America and Europe.

4. Sustainability Expectations Increased

Amazon has been criticized for packaging waste, but the company has also become one of the biggest drivers of sustainable packaging innovation.

Key sustainability shifts they accelerated:

- **Elimination of plastics** in many SIOC programs
- **Widespread adoption of curbside-recyclable mailers**
- **Pressure on brands to remove clamshells and hard-to-recycle materials**
- **Packaging scorecards** tied to vendor compliance
- **Reduced void space requirements** to cut carbon emissions

Amazon's Climate Pledge has moved sustainability from "nice to have" to "you must comply or you will pay penalties."

For many brands, it was the first time sustainability was tied directly to profitability.

5. Packaging Became a Supply Chain Tool, Not Marketing

In traditional retail, packaging is marketing-driven. In Amazon's world, it is operational.

Amazon forced the industry to evolve:

Before Amazon

- Big boxes
- Flashy graphics
- Tamper-evident features for stores
- Multi-language requirements

After Amazon

- Compression strength
- Cube efficiency
- Simplified graphics
- Pack density for palletization
- Labeling accuracy for robotic scanners

Brands now develop **dual packaging strategies**—one for e-commerce, one for retail. This dual-track model didn't exist at scale before Amazon normalized it.

6. Consumer Expectations Changed Overnight

Amazon changed how consumers think about packaging:

- 2-day delivery → packaging must survive speed
- Easy returns → packaging must be resealable
- Small-package shipments → damage rates must be near-zero
- Sustainability → consumers prefer paper-based solutions
- Unboxing → DTC brands treat packaging as part of the customer experience

The result: even small brands now design packaging with Amazon-style performance in mind.

7. Data-Driven Packaging Became the New Standard

Few industries were as unmeasured as packaging—until Amazon.

Now packaging decisions tie into:

- Damage-rate analytics
- Shipping cost data
- Dimensional-weight fees
- Vendor penalties (chargebacks)
- Return reasons
- Sustainability metrics

This forced brands to quantify packaging performance using real data, reshaping how packaging engineers and supply-chain managers collaborate.

Where the Industry Goes Next

Amazon's influence isn't slowing—it's evolving:

Future trends already visible:

- More paper-based mailers replacing plastic
- Greater use of molded fiber for protective cushioning
- On-demand packaging machines for right-sized boxes
- AI-driven package sizing
- Drone and autonomous vehicle delivery (further pushing lightweighting)
- Expansion of mono-material recyclable structures

- Increased pressure on lithium-battery and hazardous-goods packaging standards

The companies that succeed will be those who treat packaging as a strategic asset—not an afterthought.

Final Thoughts

Amazon didn't just change packaging; it rewrote the rules.

From materials and engineering to sustainability and consumer behavior, Amazon forced the packaging industry into a new era—faster, smarter, and more sustainable.

For brands, suppliers, converters, and manufacturers, the message is clear:

E-commerce packaging is no longer a category. It *is* the category.