

How Beverage Packaging Has Changed: A Consultant's View From the Front Lines of the Industry

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Few sectors of consumer packaged goods have evolved as dramatically—or as quickly—as beverage packaging. From carbonated soft drinks to functional waters, ready-to-drink coffees, and alcoholic beverages, the last two decades have completely reshaped how beverages are packaged, shipped, merchandised, and consumed. For brand owners, contract manufacturers, retailers, and equipment suppliers, these changes have altered everything from material selection and line speeds to sustainability strategies and cap/closure engineering.

As a packaging consultant with deep roots in both foodservice and retail manufacturing, I've watched these shifts firsthand. Today's beverage packaging is smarter, lighter, more sustainable, more regulated, and more competitive than ever. Here's how the landscape has changed—and what it means for brands going forward.

1. The Shift to Lightweighting and Material Efficiency

One of the largest evolutions in beverage packaging has been the aggressive move toward lightweighting. Brands now demand packaging that uses fewer raw materials, offers superior line efficiency, and reduces shipping weight without compromising durability.

- **PET bottles** are up to 30–50% lighter than they were two decades ago.
- **Aluminum can gauges** continue to fall, driven by manufacturing advances.
- **Paperboard multipacks** have shed significant weight through improved fiber engineering.

Lightweighting saves millions in raw materials and logistics, but it also introduces challenges: reduced rigidity, paneling concerns, carbonization retention, and greater sensitivity to hot-fill or tunnel-pasteurization processes. Beverage companies must now balance aggressive material reduction with functional safety and consumer expectations.

2. Sustainability Is Now a Primary Design Driver

Ten years ago, sustainability claims were marketing enhancements. Today, they are a frontline requirement.

Modern beverage packaging is being re-engineered around:

- **Recyclability** (PCR content in PET, aluminum dominance in certain categories)
- **Reduced plastic mandates** in multiple countries
- **Refillable and reuse systems**, especially in Europe
- **Investment in mono-material solutions** to support closed-loop recycling

Brands are increasingly adopting **rPET**, with some categories now averaging 25–50% recycled content. Governments and large retailers are also pressing for **EPR compliance**, requiring manufacturers to take responsibility for packaging end-of-life outcomes.

Sustainable design is no longer a “nice-to-have”—it is the cost of entry.

3. The Rise of Alternative Materials

The beverage aisle has expanded far beyond traditional PET and aluminum.

Notable new material trends include:

- **Carton-based beverages** (for waters, coffees, and nutrient drinks)
- **Bio-based and compostable plastics**—still limited, but growing in niche categories
- **Fiber-based bottles and sleeves**
- **Hybrid packaging** combining paper with thin barrier linings

Each of these formats tries to solve for sustainability, but all come with trade-offs in barrier performance, shelf life, and recycling compatibility. Packaging consultants today spend more time than ever helping clients evaluate the real-world feasibility of these alternatives.

4. E-Commerce Has Forced New Packaging Standards

Before the pandemic, beverage packaging was designed primarily for palletization and retail merchandising. But with the rise of direct-to-consumer fulfillment, Amazon, and grocery delivery, the rules changed.

Today’s beverage packaging must:

- Survive **single-unit shipping**
- Withstand **small parcel conditions**
- Minimize **damage, leakage, and swelling** at the individual-bottle level
- Meet ISTA 6 guidelines for e-commerce

This has driven packaging designers to rethink closures, seal integrity, label adhesion, and secondary packaging. Multipacks once safe for pallet shipments now require redesign for doorstep delivery.

5. Increased Regulation Around Safety and Materials

Governments worldwide have implemented stricter standards on:

- PFAS usage
- BPA alternatives
- Recycled content mandates
- Labeling requirements
- Deposit-return systems
- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws

These regulatory pressures have pushed brands to more advanced testing, more complex compliance reviews, and tighter supply chain controls. Packaging choices that were acceptable five years ago may no longer meet global safety or sustainability guidelines.

6. Smart Packaging and Consumer Interaction

Advanced technologies are reshaping the consumer experience.

New trends include:

- **QR codes** for traceability, loyalty programs, or augmented reality
- **Tamper-evident smart caps**
- **Connected packaging** offering authenticity verification
- **Sensors for temperature, freshness, or counterfeit prevention**

While adoption varies by category, the demand for interactive packaging continues to grow—particularly for premium beverages.

7. Premiumization and Brand Differentiation

Beverage brands now rely heavily on packaging to communicate quality. The shift toward premiumization has driven:

- Gloss/matte hybrid labels
- Shrink-sleeve artwork
- Specialty closures (cork hybrids, aluminum crowns, resealables)
- Sleek can formats
- Glass return in niche categories

Even value brands are elevating visual appeal to compete on crowded shelves.

What This Means for Beverage Companies Today

Whether you're launching a new beverage or refining a legacy brand, the rules of packaging have changed dramatically. Brands now compete on:

- Sustainability credibility
- Material optimization and cost control
- Supply chain resilience
- Regulatory compliance
- E-commerce durability
- Consumer engagement
- Speed to market

At Packaging Resources, we help companies navigate these shifts with clear strategies, sourcing intelligence, and decades of manufacturing expertise. Beverage packaging has never been more complex—or more full of opportunity for brands willing to innovate.