

Are Sustainable Packaging Initiatives Really Working?

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of Packaging Resources May 2025

Sustainability has become the strongest force reshaping the packaging industry in the last decade. Retailers, brand owners, regulators, and consumers all demand “greener” options—less plastic, more recycled content, cleaner materials, and reduced environmental impact. But beneath the marketing slogans and ambitious goals lies a pressing question:

Are sustainable packaging initiatives actually working?

As a consultancy with more than 35 years in global packaging—across foodservice, retail, manufacturing, and supply-chain operations—we’ve seen the difference between meaningful progress and empty promises. The truth is nuanced: some initiatives are genuinely transforming the landscape, while others remain more aspirational than effective.

Where Sustainability Is Working

1. Lightweighting & Material Reduction

The most successful sustainability program—by far—is the simplest: using less material.

- PET bottles are now up to **40% lighter** than they were two decades ago.
- Polyethylene films routinely use downgauged blends that maintain performance.
- Molded fiber trays and cups are increasingly replacing heavier or multi-layer structures.

This initiative works because reducing materials directly cuts cost, carbon footprint, and transportation energy. It’s the rare sustainability win that aligns perfectly with business incentives.

2. Recycled Content Integration

Advances in mechanical and chemical recycling have improved both supply and quality of PCR (Post-Consumer Recycled) resins, especially PET.

- Food-grade rPET is now widely available in many regions.
- Major CPGs are consistently hitting **25–50% PCR content** in specific SKUs.
- Some states are mandating PCR minimums, accelerating adoption.

Challenges remain (supply consistency and higher pricing), but this is a real, measurable success story.

3. Reusable Systems (Where the Conditions Are Right)

Closed-loop systems—think beverage crates, keg programs, durable totes, and some QSR (quick-service restaurant) reusables—perform well when:

- Return rates are verifiable
- Cleaning logistics are centralized
- The product flow is predictable

In these controlled environments, reusables dramatically cut waste and lifecycle emissions.

Where Sustainability Is Not Working (Yet)

1. Consumer Recycling Behavior

The greatest breakdown in the sustainability chain occurs at the bin.

- Only **5–6% of plastics** in the U.S. are actually recycled.
- Confusing labeling leads to poor sorting.
- Municipal recycling systems vary wildly by region.

Brands design recyclable packaging, but if **the consumer doesn't dispose of it correctly, the value is lost.**

2. Compostable Packaging

Compostables are an appealing concept pushed heavily by foodservice and eco-conscious brands. But in practice:

- Only **industrial composting** facilities can break down most PLA and mold-fiber packaging.
- Many regions **don't accept packaging** in their compost streams.
- Contamination (food, coatings, inks) complicates processing.

Compostables work in niche, high-control scenarios. But as a broad solution? Not yet.

3. Multi-Layer Flexible Packaging

Flexible packaging is a sustainability paradox: it uses very little material and has a low carbon footprint—but is nearly impossible to recycle.

Despite impressive R&D in mono-material structures, barriers, and recyclable laminates, **scale and infrastructure lag far behind.**

4. Corporate "Sustainability Goals" That Lack Measurement

Many companies have announced bold 2025 sustainability targets—virgin reduction, recyclability commitments, carbon neutrality—but few have transparent reporting.

A lack of:

- standardized metrics
- data verification
- cross-industry accountability

...means progress is uneven and often overstated.

The Big Reality: Sustainability Only Works When Economics Work

In every successful initiative, **economics have aligned with environmental benefit.**

- Lightweighting saves money
- PCR requirements stabilize long-term supply
- Reusables reduce purchasing costs in closed loops
- Sustainable optimized designs lower freight and warehousing costs

Any sustainability program that relies on consumers, government subsidies, or unproven technology tends to stall.

What Packaging Decision-Makers Should Focus On Now

As advisors to major foodservice, CPG, retail, and manufacturing brands, Packaging Resources recommends prioritizing:

1. Design for Reality, Not Just Recyclability

What can be recycled in **your markets today**, not theoretically.

2. Reduce First, Replace Second

The most sustainable material is the material you never use.

3. Embrace Recycled Content Where Quality and Supply Allow

Particularly in PET and certain HDPE applications.

4. Implement Closed-Loop or In-Facility Reuse Where Practical

Factories, distribution centers, and foodservice environments have the best success rates.

5. Build Sustainability Into Cost Modeling

Sustainability is no longer a side project—it must integrate into operations, procurement, and total-cost-of-ownership assessments.

So... Are Sustainable Packaging Initiatives Really Working?

Yes and no.

Some initiatives—lightweighting, PCR integration, smart design—are making real, measurable progress. Others—compostables, wide-scale consumer recycling, flexible packaging recovery—are not yet delivering the environmental benefits promised.

The key is to pursue sustainability pragmatically, not idealistically. Companies that focus on what *actually works* will see meaningful reductions in waste, emissions, and cost—while staying ahead of regulatory and consumer expectations.

And that's where Packaging Resources comes in: providing honest guidance, industry-veteran experience, and practical strategies that balance sustainability goals with operational reality.