



# **Making the Transition to Fiber-Based Multipacks: The intersection of performance, convenience & sustainability in a circular economy**



**Graphic  
Packaging**  
INTERNATIONAL



An underwater photograph showing various pieces of plastic waste, including a large, crumpled clear plastic bag and a green plastic bottle, floating in the water. The scene is dimly lit, with light rays filtering through the water.

## Introduction

According to a report<sup>1</sup> by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), global plastic production reached a staggering 460 million tonnes in 2019, more than doubling from 2000 statistics. Only 9 percent of that total tonnage was successfully recycled, 19 percent was incinerated, and nearly half was sent to landfills. The remainder—roughly 20 percent—was disposed of in uncontrolled dumpsites or leaked into the environment. Almost 40 percent of plastic use was attributed to packaging, which typically has a short lifespan when compared to other applications such as construction.

Amidst growing environmental concerns, consumer perceptions of plastic packaging are rapidly evolving. Realizing that the plastic rings connecting a six-pack of beverage cans may take up to 400 years to break down<sup>2</sup>, environmentally conscious consumers are paying more attention to the materials that encase the products they buy.

The impact of packaging waste is also driving stricter regulations around the globe, as governments and industries enact initiatives to reduce dependence on single-use plastics in favor of more sustainable alternatives. This accelerates the adoption of packaging alternatives, leading to the transition from a linear ‘use-and-dispose’ model to an economy that promotes recycling and reuse.

The entire packaging value chain must adjust to address these changing consumer sentiments while complying with rigorous regulations. Beverage companies in particular can meet these expectations head-on by exploring the benefits of fiber-based multipacks as a viable alternative to plastic rings and wraps.

<sup>1</sup> <https://rds.org.co/apc-aa-files/205ec78c9cca6d1850bdca24e20e50bf/document.pdf>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://archive.epa.gov/epawaste/conserve/smm/wastewise/web/html/factoid.html>



## The environmental benefits of fiber

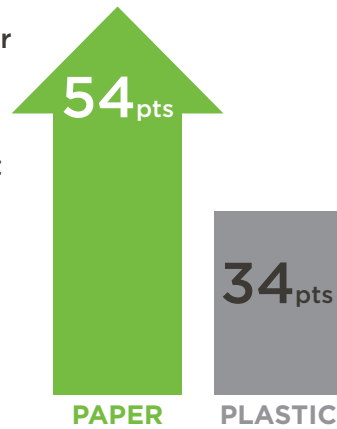
Swapping single-use plastics for recyclable alternatives can significantly reduce the environmental impact of packaging. Paperboard is made from renewable plant-based fiber from sustainably managed forests, and the fiber is often a byproduct of construction timber. The paper and paper packaging industry is focused on maintaining healthy forests through its commitment to sustainable forestry practices and replanting trees.

Compared to plastic alternatives, paper and paperboard are far more likely to be recycled—with paper and paperboard making up 66.5 percent of the all recycled materials in the United States while plastic makes up 4.47 percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, according to Eurostat<sup>4</sup>, in Europe in 2020, 81.6 percent of paper and paper-based packaging was recycled while the figure for plastic packaging was 37.7 percent. Similarly, paper-based products are far less likely to end up in landfills: in the United States, the figure is 22 percent compared to 70 percent for plastics, and in Europe, 8 percent compared to 24 percent of plastics.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials>  
<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/cei\\_wm020/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/cei_wm020/default/table)

Please tell us your **FEELINGS ABOUT EACH INDUSTRY** using a scale that ranges from 0 to 100.

Plastics has dropped from 41 in 2020 to 34 in 2021.



**60%** **PAPER PRODUCTS** are part of the environmental solution  
AGREE

**64%** **PAPER-BASED PACKAGING** is part of the environmental solution  
AGREE

**87%** **Prefer** paper-based product packaging

Source: Isobar November 2021 A&U Tracking

**4 in 10** **ACTIVELY AVOID** plastic product packaging.  
*Up from 34% in 2020*

Research<sup>5</sup> from the Paper & Packaging Board in 2021 demonstrates a clear—and increasing—shift towards paper-based packaging alternatives.

Research from Euromonitor in 2021 tells a similar story:

- 60 percent of consumers pledged to reduce their use of plastics
- 46 percent of consumers pledged to use sustainable packaging
- 56 percent of consumers pledged to recycle

Consumers are increasingly using their spending power to drive the impact they want to see. The majority (73 percent) of consumers say they would change their consumption habits to reduce their environmental impact, according to a global online survey conducted by Nielsen. Many of them would even pay higher prices for products or packages made with sustainable materials (38 percent)—especially if the alternatives offered superior function or performance over plastic (46 percent). Consistent with these sentiments, 81 percent of consumers expect companies to implement initiatives focused on improving the environment.

Widespread commitment to reducing packaging waste is more than just a passing trend; brands can gain respect and revenue by responding to it. However, to justify a move away from plastic in commercial beverage applications, packaging solutions must address these environmental concerns while performing at least as well as their plastic counterparts. In other words, paperboard multipacks must be perfectly suited for the products they hold.

5 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/Most-Americans-Say-That-the-Design-of-a-Products-Packaging-Often-Influences-Their-Purchase-Decisions>



## Paperboard fit for purpose

It doesn't matter how sustainable a packaging solution might be if it doesn't meet the performance requirements of an effective beverage multipack. These requirements include:

- Ability to **perform** through the supply chain
- **Flexibility** in pack styles, formats, and size capabilities
- **Convenience** for carrying, opening, and dispensing
- Alluring **shelf appeal** in retail stores

### Performance through the supply chain

It is important that alternatives to plastic protect and securing products adequately. The innovative design of paperboard packaging secures products with the minimum amount of material needed to be effective depending on configuration and application. The packaging itself is durable and ensures that the configuration is robust and remains intact through the supply chain and onto the retail shelf. Adopting paper-based packaging ensures that customers can enjoy a recyclable alternative with the same degree of functionality.





## Flexible formats

From beverage bottles or cans to canned foods and yogurt cups, multipack cartons are suitable for a wide range of package styles, formats, and sizes to meet the unique requirements of each product and distributor. Depending on your needs, your ideal multipack solution might take a range of different appearances:

- **Fully enclosed multipacks** deliver maximum coverage to protect your product, offering the broadest branding real estate options. This product features a variety of carry features, including handles or finger holes. Additionally, cans are completely covered to protect the product through the supply chain.
- **Wrap-style multipacks** deliver just enough coverage to secure your product while maintaining the visibility of the cans. Packs offer a variety of styles, such as straight, top and bottom gussets, wraps with panels, and more. Customers can enjoy added convenience with multiple carry options available.
- **Clip-style multipacks** deliver a minimal material option that still protects and secures products through the supply chain. The range of solutions available offer the opportunity for high-impact branding and comfortable to carry finger holes.
- **Basket carriers** are designed to hold bottled beverages with easy-carry handles for convenience and portability. The product maintains its structural integrity in wet or damp conditions to ensure product safety. Additionally, shape enhancements are possible to maximize shelf appeal and branding.



These versatile multipack formats can accommodate all pack configurations for cans and PET bottles. Whatever style best suits your product application, paperboard alternatives can replace plastic rings and shrink film to reduce the environmental footprint of your packaging while adding unique features that set your multipacks apart from the competition.

## Consumer convenience

Portability is a top priority when transporting multipacks of beverages and other canned products throughout the supply chain. Consumers want to feel good about the environmental impact of products and packages they buy, while also having features that make the package easy to use. For that reason, consumer convenience is a driving factor of any multipack design. A foldable design also contributes to simplified post-use recycling as it takes up less space.

Although plastic six-pack rings and shrink wrap films sufficiently hold beverage cans and PET bottles in place, they can be inconvenient when it comes to carrying, opening, and dispensing products easily.

Paperboard multipacks, in comparison, offer excellent options for convenient handling from the distributor to retail shelves to the customer's refrigerator.



## Comfortable handle options

Fiber-based multipacks from Graphic Packaging deliver multiple handle options to suit various market needs and preferences. For example, wrap and clip style multipacks feature finger holes for easy carry with improved comfort and reliability for product transportation. Fully enclosed cartons may feature two-sided crate handles for heavy packs, reinforced strap handles for one-handed carry, straps that make packs portable when open, and webbed designs to hold ice so the carton doubles as a cooler.

## Easy to open and dispense

Multipack solutions must strike a delicate balance between securely holding cans during transport and easily opening and dispensing the product when the customer is ready to consume. Clip-style cartons for example can keep the tops of cans clean and covered while securing products in place. Yet when it's time for a drink, each can is able to be removed from the carton effortlessly without ripping or tearing the paperboard. Innovative carton designs can create excellent pack integrity with wet strength to stand up against damp and humid conditions in the cooler.

A range of retail-ready solutions make product display and dispensing even easier in the store. For example, fully enclosed cartons can offer a fold-up advertising panel for countertop displays, a perforated zipper to remove the top of the package for easy access, or individual dispensing systems for grab-and-go convenience. These innovations eliminate the need for additional trays or shrink wraps while offering improved access to the product.

## Shelf appeal

Fiber-based multipacks offer the potential to maximize on-shelf differentiation and brand appeal. Paperboard printing possibilities deliver top-quality graphics, full spectrum colors, and other enhancements that plastic simply cannot.

For example, using a high-gloss coating to accentuate details on otherwise matte finish packaging creates a standout effect on the shelf. Likewise, dimensional coating and texture add depth and amplify the visual impact of a multipack with enhanced tactile sensations.

Paperboard expands the potential marketing real estate of packaging with more printable space to communicate brand messaging. This space can be leveraged to draw awareness to sustainability initiatives, announcing your move toward renewable materials by telling consumers that the paperboard is made of plant-based fiber from sustainably managed forests and can easily be recycled.

According to the online survey conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the Paper and Packaging Board, 71 percent of American consumers say they're more likely to buy brands that package their products in paper or cardboard, and 63 percent agree that paper and cardboard packaging make a product seem premium or high quality.

Brands can further enhance the sustainability credentials of natural fiber by printing key messaging on the pack, such as fiber certification information. The available real estate can be extended by printing messaging on the reverse of tear-off strips.



With unlimited opportunities to print graphic elements across and outside and inside of multipacks, paperboard offers an effective billboard to promote brand messages for greater shelf appeal. This brand premiumization helps differentiate brands that are moving toward more sustainable packaging, and may result in increased sales volume.



# Adopting innovative paperboard multipacks

Driven by concern for the environment, tightening regulations, and the quest for a premium image, craft brewers and larger beverage companies across the globe have switched to paperboard packaging. Many leading brands are partnering with Graphic Packaging to successfully implement recyclable, fiber-based solutions that help them achieve their corporate sustainability goal to reduce single-use plastic packaging.

## **Case Study: Budweiser Brewing Group UK&I meets the demand for hard seltzers with retail-friendly Bud Light Hard Seltzer packaging solution made from renewable plant-based fiber from sustainably managed forests**

Facing fierce competition in the hard seltzer sector, Budweiser Brewing Group needed standout packaging for the U.K. launch of its Bud Light Seltzer brand. In line with the company's mission to create a better world, the beverage company partnered with Graphic Packaging to fast-track a shelf-ready solution to facilitate single-unit sales of its 12-pack product.



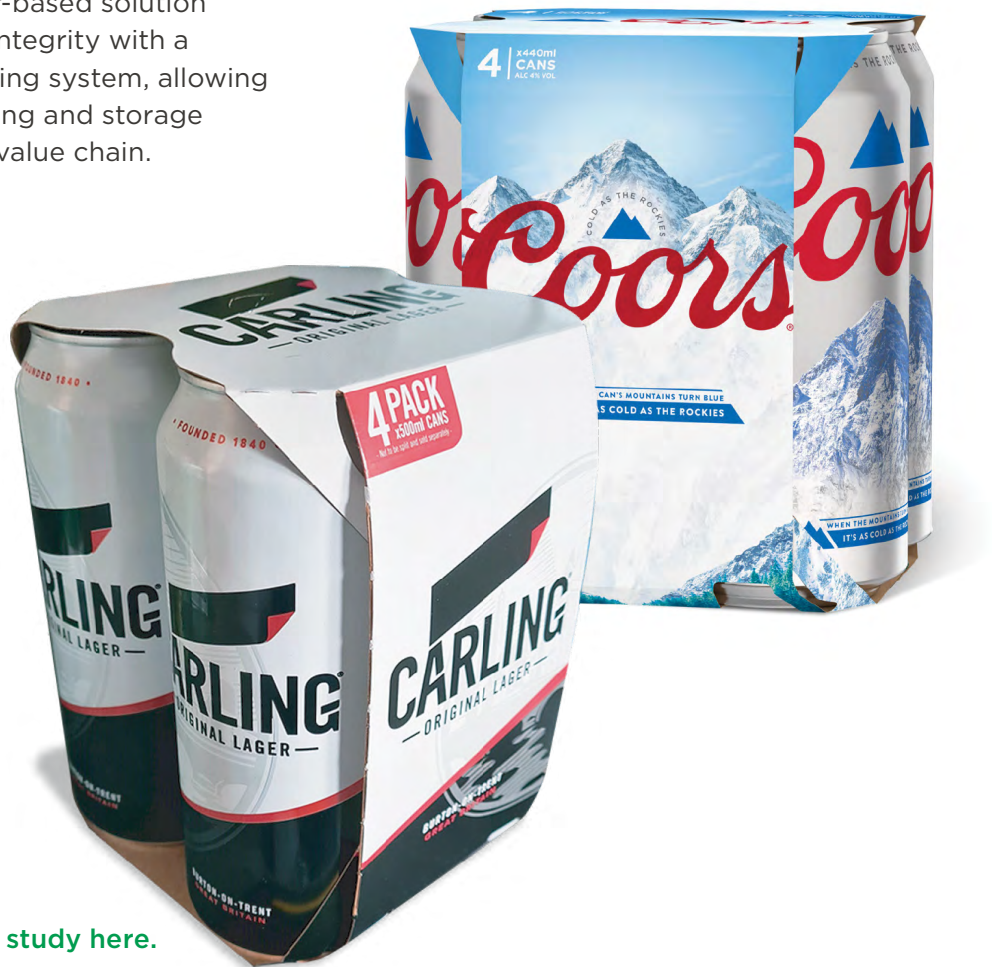
- The multipack incorporates a convenient zip feature to allow easy removal of the top section of the carton, exposing all 12 cans for easy access.
- The cartons are composed of AquaKote™ coated board, a recyclable fiber-based material that offers a superior printing surface for high-quality graphics.
- The construction provides excellent pack integrity and performance in high-humidity conditions, offering strength without requiring an additional tray.
- The solution delivers enhanced branding and promotional opportunities, creating maximum impact on the shelf and elevating the consumer's experience.

[Read the full case study here.](#)

## Case Study: Molson Coors replaces plastic rings with fully recyclable fiber-based sleeve on can multipacks

As part of its sustainability goals to make 100 percent of its packaging reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2025, Molson Coors set out to replace plastic rings with fiber-based sleeves for its 4-, 6- and 8-can multipacks. The beverage behemoth partnered with Graphic Packaging to design a custom paperboard solution for its U.K. beverage portfolio.

- The can-height wraparound design enhances branding opportunities compared to the previous solution, offering more space to promote Molson Coors products.
- Paperboard material is printed with high-quality graphics to increase standout shelf appeal, differentiating the pack from plastic ring-wrapped alternatives.
- The multipack wrap is made from renewable—recyclable fibers, blended with an average of 10 percent pre-consumer recycled content—to support the company’s sustainability goals.
- The sturdy, fiber-based solution increases pack integrity with a proprietary locking system, allowing for better handling and storage throughout the value chain.



[Read the full case study here.](#)





# Future-proof your multipacks with fiber

Whether you're making soft drinks, beers, other beverages, or even canned food and pet food, companies that stay on the leading edge of innovation in packaging gain a distinct competitive advantage. Fiber-based multipacks are quickly eclipsing other packing solutions by addressing consumers' environmental concerns while offering clear benefits over single-use plastic rings and shrink wrap.

Paperboard multipacks have the power to:

- Reduce dependence on single-use plastics
- Satisfy evolving consumer needs and preferences
- Differentiate your brand with maximum shelf appeal
- Promote your products with a range of display options
- Stand up to the rigors of transport and storage throughout the supply chain
- Enhance brand loyalty with an elevated customer experience
- Add value through unique features that make your packaging a selling point

The experts at Graphic Packaging work closely with brands to innovate award-winning fiber-based solutions to address the toughest challenges facing multipack manufacturers and retailers today. We leverage our breadth of industry experience to deliver packaging solutions that are responsibly made, beautifully designed, and fit-for-purpose to meet specific brand requirements. We'll guide you through every step of the transition from plastic to paperboard to unleash the full potential of your packaging.

Ready to revolutionize your multipacks with more sustainable packaging? **Contact us** to consult with our experts about the growth potential of fiber-based packaging solutions.



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