

Have 'Green' Consumables Reached a 'Tipping Point' in the Coffee Sector?

by **Sally Potter,**
Vice President, PR Post

There are a number of positive trends propelling growth in the specialty coffee sector; more product differentiation with new flavors and dietary supplements, and growing consumer interest in ethical 'Fair Trade' blends. These trends, happily for the future of the sector, are attracting the attention of a young target demographic rediscovering coffee as a beverage and willing to pay the premium price to drink it.

But one trend that has not been as evident is sector interest in sustainable packaging, even though there is no shortage of marketers promoting their version of environmentally friendly or biodegradable products. In the specialty coffee sector, taste and freshness have been king. Packaging- the materials and methods – has tended to take a back seat to the roasting process. In a 2007 survey of two thousand package suppliers and brand owners, only 21 percent indicated that sustainability was very important in coffee packaging decisions; 36 percent said somewhat important.

That attitude could be about to change. The tipping point or trigger is the emergence of new material technologies. One in particular could establish a new green standard for all coffee packaging. It is a plastic organic additive technology that could resolve many of the end-of-life issues that persistently dog the coffee-drinking experience, yet deliver on critical performance characteristics.

Sustainable packaging is now starting to capture serious attention in the sector for a couple of reasons. One, is that packaging's look and feel is increasingly being seen as a statement of commitment to freshness and quality and as an important part of the premium brand experience. Second, there have been significant advances in material technology that are enabling the greening of consumables in the sector.

environmentally friendly sector, considerable progress has been made on the greening of single-use or disposable coffee cups, lids, sleeves, stir sticks, and utensils with functional solutions using paper or PLA made from corn (also known as polylactic acid). These solutions offer a viable, compostable alternative. PLA, is seen as an environmentally-friendly substitute for petroleum-based plastics; however,



there are some issues which have limited its widespread adoption. One of the most significant is that PLA is not backyard compostable, and can only be composted in commercial composting facilities. Given that there are only 144 commercial composters across the country serving 30,000 communities, the compostability of PLA becomes almost an irrelevant environmental benefit.

The latest breakthrough technology offers new options for roasters and retailers, struggling to market an environmentally friendly flexible packaging that offers strong barrier protection similar

to traditional foil or laminated coffee bags. Until recently, there had been little progress. That has now changed. TekPak Solutions Inc. of Ontario, Canada has introduced a new green line of high and medium barrier organic packaging designed for the coffee market. It is available as rollstock for fill/seal bags or stand-up pouches.

The new technology has the potential to become the new green standard for coffee packaging. Omni-Degradables are traditional plastics that have been engineered using an organic additive to biodegrade in backyard compost, landfill, and if littered, will biodegrade in rivers, lakes and oceans. The additive makes the plastic molecules attractive to the microbes found in landfills, composters, soil or water.

TekPak is particularly proud to be one of the first out of the gate with a foil replacement film. It has similar barrier properties to regular film, but is totally biodegradable. According to Robert Pocius, CEO of TekPak, Omni-Degradables provide a better option for coffee makers because the products perform superbly on barrier protection and match the performance characteristics and benefits of traditional plastics. The only difference is that now the packaging has a limited end-of-life span programmed to achieve complete organic decay when exposed to the microbes in soil or water.

"The time has come to bring this kind of innovation to market," says Pocius of TekPak. "Hopefully, this technology is the tipping point for a new wave in sustainable packaging. The product has been designed to address the shortcomings of PLA, and should receive broader roaster and retailer acceptance. Our new line is low cost, completely shelf-stable, easily manufactured requiring no new special machining, and can be backyard composted."

Circling back to the original question posed by Coffee Talk on whether sustainable packaging has reached a 'tipping point' to broader industry acceptance in the specialty coffee market, the answer is a clear "yes".