

Pioneers don't always get the credit they deserve.

Take General Mills, for example. General Mills was one of the first companies to convert to 100% recycled paperboard packaging. The company was ahead of the curve, signing a licensing agreement in February 1997 with the 100% Recycled Paperboard Alliance also known as RPA-100%.

RPA-100% is a nonprofit trade alliance that promotes the use and labeling of 100% recycled paperboard and provides brands with substantiation of their 100% recycled paper claim with their certification program. The group serves as a bridge between two key players in the recycling equation — recycled paperboard manufacturers and consumer products companies.

General Mills (GMI) was an early adopter. A large portion of the GMI portfolio uses the RPA-100% logo, and many others have followed their lead. More than 100 companies use the 100% recycled paperboard symbol, including 3M, Ben & Jerry's, Chobani, Danone, Kellogg's, Nestle', Proctor & Gamble, Reynold's Consumer Products, SC Johnson, and Unilever. These 100 companies label over 10 billion⁽¹⁾ recycled paperboard cartons with the RPA100 symbol.

Making the switch

Two key reasons companies decide to use 100% recycled paperboard are the environmental and economic benefits.

“We know our consumer base wants to know that we're using sustainably sourced fiber and we want an easy way to communicate that,” says Patrick Keenan, R&D packaging engineer for Annie's Inc, a well-known organic brand acquired by General Mills in 2014.

For companies like Annie's with a high level of brand loyalty, there are expectations for the product and the packaging.

“We need something that's transparent and trusted, something that we can verify. The RPA-100% logo checks all those boxes in one single logo,” says Keenan.

The benefits of 100% recycled paperboard



The logo and its easy-to-understand language are just one of the benefits.

For starters, 100% recycled paperboard meets all the performance requirements that products need to ensure product and package integrity through the distribution system. The material can achieve this at a competitive price.

It's also sustainable. Recycled paperboard is part of a circular system that extends the life of virgin fibers. The cycle of reuse optimizes the use of forest resources and, more importantly, it lessens the pressure on landfills and avoids the greenhouse gases generated when paperboard packaging degrades in the landfill. For every ton of paperboard recycled, there is a significant reduction in greenhouse gases.

"We want to provide the reassurance that our paperboard boxes are not contributing to deforestation, and we value the reduction in carbon emissions tied to recycled content," says Kim Nichols, packaging R&D and sustainability lead at General Mills.

Because of its versatility and quality, recycled paperboard can be used in all kinds of packaging and look good doing it. Plus, the versatility and quality of recycled paperboard provides functionality so it can be used in all kinds of packaging and look good doing it. Coated and uncoated paperboard surfaces accept all the modern enhancements — think hot foil stamping, UV coating and embossing — that brands require for their products.

On top of that, the certified symbol and licensing agreement create peace of mind because it confirms that a certified member company mill produced the paperboard.

"It's helpful to our internal brand teams as well," says Nichols. "They can easily understand and talk about recycled paperboard, and it gives them more credibility."

A logo that builds trust

"The goal of communication on packaging is to support recycling and to also educate the consumer," says Keenan. "There's this education opportunity with the made-from-100%-recycled-material logo that advocates to the consumer. And right next to it, it says recycle it. When you recycle, it can be turned right back into another box. We're able to educate the consumer about circularity without taking up too much space on the box."

And that matters — 81% of consumers feel better about a company that uses 100% recycled paperboard for its product packaging, [according to a survey](#) conducted by SurVata Inc. for RPA-100%. RPA-100% makes it easy for companies to deliver on that promise. A fiber certification process established in 2014 means member companies can dig into the data to see what mills they're working with and to substantiate the recycled fiber claims of all uncoated and coated recycled paperboard.

"That's the value of us working with RPA-100%. — for external reporting, we know we can easily & safely say our RPA100% certified paperboard is sustainably source,". says Keenan.

Nichols is quick to agree: “No audits for the brands, no deep dive. The assurance from auditing the material comes from the source — the recycled paperboard mills. It’s not something you find very much, honestly. Most people do not have their markets certified. And RPA-100% makes it easy for companies to do — it’s a great complement to your recyclability claims.”

What plastic can learn from paper

There’s a lot to be learned from the early leaders in the recycled paperboard industry, especially as companies turn their attention to the next hurdle — plastic.

"I feel like we're missing the opportunity to talk about how much work has been done to get the recycled paperboard numbers where they are today. I think we should be celebrating the fact that 100% certified recycled paperboard is in so many products," says Keenan. "Maybe that's good — that people aren't as worried about paper — but it makes me think, what can plastic learn from paper?"

Lessons from the transformation of one recycling and reuse industry surely can be helpful to the next. And partnerships like the one General Mills and RPA-100% share can show the way.

For additional information about RPA-100%, including its members and license program, go to rpa100.com.

1. Source RPA100