

DRIVING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE WET WIPES INDUSTRY

Nice-Pak annually produces approximately 500 million packs of wet wipes for the European market. This product range is now almost entirely plastic-free. Commercial Director Ian Anderson and CSR & Communications Manager Alison Roberts explained to Hannah Barnett how the company has reached this impressive achievement.



Nice-Pak has always had a reputation for innovation. The company played a pioneering role in the creation of the wet wipe and its associated categories. This started with food service wipes in the 1950s and progressed through the development of baby and facial wipes in later years. Household wipes followed in the early 2000s, securing Nice-Pak's dominance in the wet wipe market.

Now a new transformation is taking place in the arena of sustainability: It means the much-maligned wet wipe is no longer an enemy of the environment, thanks largely to the endeavours of Nice-Pak, its suppliers and customers.

"Around 2009, way ahead of our time, we put sustainability at the heart of what we do," Ian Anderson, Commercial Director, explained. "We started to report externally, unprompted and unpressured, on our sustainability commitments. Our intention was, and still is, to use them as the bedrock of all our innovation."

With 700 employees and three factories across the UK and Germany, the business serves both private label and branded sectors of the market. It covers all the major product categories; baby wipes, facial wipes, household cleaning wipes and moist toilet tissue. Nice-Pak has a dominant share in the in the UK market, where the per-capita consumption of wet wipes is the highest in the world.

The pledges

In 2020, Nice-Pak issued six sustainability pledges, ushering in a key turning point in the company's sustainability journey. ▽



The pledges included offering a responsibly sourced, plastic-free, nonwoven wipe option as part of every quote to customers, and commitments to sustainable packaging, reducing the use of chemicals and minimising the impact of its factories.

“It’s not just a question of what we do, but how we do it,” Mr Anderson said; “the 2020 pledges built on our position at the time, but a lot has happened since then.

“It’s easy to concentrate on what the products are made of, but it’s equally important to look at the business and how it operates in terms of carbon impact, as well as our engagement with employees and local communities. We’ve tried to do the right thing on all fronts, and I suspect that we have invested way above the industry average on these commitments.”

Nice-Pak set its focus on shifting from polymer-based fibres towards those derived from natural sources, which are free from plastic and biodegradable. In

2022, the company reached a significant milestone, with 90% of its wipes in the UK market becoming plastic-free – comfortably exceeding the target of 80%. When the pledges were made in 2020, only 53% of its wipes were plastic-free.

“We achieved 90 per cent plastic-free by working with both suppliers and customers,” said Mr Anderson. “Many customers have made their own pledges to eliminate plastics in products, so we are all working in the same direction. We are in control of certain elements when removing plastic from our products, but we also rely on collaboration. In the world of private label and brands: customers have a dominant role in deciding what their products are composed of and how they are described.

“We can control the dosing of liquid onto a wipe, the folding, the cutting, the packing, the wrapping and the application of labels: but further upstream, things like the fibres used in the nonwoven design, the structure

of recyclable laminates and labels plays a huge part in our ability to deliver on sustainable targets. That was a challenge and we’re grateful to our suppliers for what they’ve done to help us get where we are.”

It was also vital during the development process that quality was not reduced and that wipes performed as well as, if not better than, those that went before. This meant rigorous testing into how different materials responded on the production line and the degree to which combinations of materials satisfied consumer need.

The sustainable package

Nice-Pak’s sustainable initiatives have been recognised by rating platform EcoVadis. The certification body considers four areas: environment, labour and human

rights, ethics and sustainable procurement. Nice-Pak was platinum certified in 2022, placing it in the top 1% of over 90,000 companies worldwide.

“This is an independently assessed CSR scorecard, requiring a plethora of supporting documentation. To be rated in the top one per cent is a phenomenal achievement,” said Alison Roberts, CSR & Communications Manager. “It is testament to all those across our business who have worked tirelessly to develop and manufacture these sustainable solutions.”

The company achieved its standout rating by considering the full spectrum of what it means to be a truly sustainable business.

“We believe that human rights and ethics are as important as everything else,” Mr Anderson said. “Nice-Pak is proud



to have been rated as a top employer for ten consecutive years. We treat our people fairly and try to make work as enjoyable as possible."

Into the future

Nice-Pak maintains its competitive edge by choosing not to vertically integrate; going against the grain of some parts of the market. "We take the view that good companies understand their spheres of expertise better than anybody else," Mr Anderson explained. "We have a strategy of collaborating closely with the true experts in the technologies that underpin our work, without necessarily trying to replicate what they do."

An ongoing challenge at Nice-Pak International's HQ involves countering misinformation regarding wet wipes. But, as the company has a dominant share in the UK market, it can be confident that most UK wet wipes no longer contain plastic.

There is also a continuous effort to ensure the products are the best they can be. This includes ensuring that they remain affordable and never compromising on quality. "First, there was a challenge in ensuring that plastic-free wet wipes didn't make the consumer feel that sustainability was a sacrifice," Mr Anderson said. "Now, we want to go a step further and deliver a level of tactile performance that's better



than anything anyone's ever experienced before, including when plastic was the baseline."

Nice-Pak's pioneering role driving change in the industry is indisputable. "We took action before legislation was calling for it and began offering customers choices in this area," Ms Roberts said. "As a result of that initiative - along with the support of key suppliers and customers - we have driven large scale sustainable change across the industry. And there's still so much more we can achieve."

These impressive achievements were only possible as part of a close partnership with customers. Throughout these sustainable developments, Nice-Pak consistently maintained the high service levels demanded by customers.

Pragmatism, collaboration, innovation and continuous evolution remain at the heart of everything Nice-Pak does.

"The pace of technological development is so fast: we must always be ready to change direction, or accommodate materials which people didn't even dream of just a few years ago," Mr Anderson concluded. "We can only do that with the right partners. And we've got tentacles reaching out across the industry, with some of the best brains out there already working on the next invention." ■



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