

19. Moonen Packaging

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From Story to Attitude



Nine years ago the entrepreneur Gé Moonen met a Chinese selling shoe fillings made out of sugar cane. This encounter was the start of a big leap towards sustainability at Moonen Packaging, supplier of packaging and packaging materials. Today the company encourages customers to buy biodegradable products. "They still are difficult to sell, but not difficult to persevere with."

To entice customers they receive an unrequested second product with any offer request for a "normal" product: a similar product of the durable Moonen Natural series.

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Consumers currently are bombarded with logos. Besides brands they see diverging pictures that indicate how healthy something is or how environmentally- or animal-friendly it was produced and packaged. The media regularly publish critical reports about this which makes it even more confusing for the consumer. The Weert family company Moonen Packaging tries to stand out socially responsibly. What started 9 years ago as a marketing stunt ("environmentally friendly was a hype at the time and I thought there would be a market for sugar cane packaging") ultimately led to a new policy. Or in the words of Gé Moonen himself: "First it is a story, later it becomes an attitude".

The encounter with the Chinese led to the production of sugar cane trays that are now bought by the French supermarket group Carrefour in large numbers. Selling them was initially quite a challenge. "At the time it was a type of tree-hugging sector. The clients thought it was a fantastic product but didn't buy it. Sugar cane for example is perfectly suited for the packaging of meat: it is moisturefat and oil resistant. But meat traders still preferred the transparent trays because the consumers are used to them. Recognisability is very important in our



Studio Janssen, Moonen Natural Hot Cup. © Moonen Packaging

sector. Take the Coca Cola bottle for example. If you were to give it another shape, you probably could transport a greater number of bottles in a truck, which is better for the environment. But don't think Coca Cola would start that. That bottle is so defining; it is part of the brand. And as a seller you can't say: it's that or nothing. That would soon leave you without customers."

Start at the base with renewable raw materials to ensure that in the end we have a lot more options. Once that is the norm; we will lead.

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In the meantime Moonen Packaging supplies – the company does not manufacture anything – besides thousands of 'normal' packagings, biodegradable boxes, trays, bags, plates, filling material, foil and waste refuse bags to European customers. To entice customers they receive an unrequested second product with any offer request for a 'normal' product: a similar product of the durable Moonen Natural series. The objective of reaching 10 percent turnover with this series has long been met says Moonen. "It probably will be 17 percent." In 2006 he followed in his father's footsteps. His grandfather, a grocer with a true commercial sense took the first steps into the packaging world in the Fifties. The current director is the first of the family to start using renewable raw materials. Al Gore's documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth', about global warming and its consequences, was a wake-up call for him, he says. "It then became clear we really had to do something, that it was scientifically proven that the future otherwise looks bleak for our planet and our children."

Although it is crystal clear he has inherited the family commercial sense, Moonen seems to combine it with the sincere motivation to work on a sustainable future. In that context he invents new chain concepts with other



Moonen Packaging, Compostable dinnerware. © Moonen Packaging

companies. “We are negotiating with a coffee supplier. He supplies the devices, we supply the cups. The intention is that they are collected by waste processor Van Gansewinkel and recycled into hygienic paper by Van Houtum.” Sustainability is high on his internal agenda too. Ground water heats the head office, sensor lighting has been installed, the lease cars are 'slightly greener', the staff drink tap water instead of bottled water, documents are printed in small letters to save paper and a vegetation roof is being considered.

Hopefully renewable will become the standard in the future.

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The entrepreneur criticises companies that unrightfully present themselves as "green": “Some have their staff drive clean diesel cars and then proclaim to be an eco company. How ridiculous”. He is not 100% positive about ‘Cradle to Cradle organisations’ either. Three years ago Moonen wanted to have a biodegradable beaker Cradle to Cradle certified. The final objective: a fully C2C-certified assortment. A contract was proudly concluded with EPEA Nederland, which assists companies in this. However, the cooperation was ended prematurely. Moonen did not like the approach. He doesn't want to go into details, but does reveal that the 'non-transparency about the commercial character' made him decide to stop continuing on that road.

“I am sure that the beaker could have been certified and still believe in the Cradle to Cradle principles. But I am not allowed to use the logo. I advise other entrepreneurs to assess such organisations objectively and critically before cooperating with them. That helps you to avoid unpleasant surprises.”

He is remarkably more lenient about China, where he regularly does business. The growing mega-economy is systematically accused of not doing enough for the



Studio Janssen,
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environment. “Rightly so, but a lot of good happens too and that remains unreported. In some pilot garden villages electric public transport is very normal. And that would be front page news here. The sugar cane factory we work with uses green energy and re-uses water. We try to help entrepreneurs there in achieving sustainable management, to enable them to meet our requirements. A difficult path, because as a result products sometimes become too expensive for the Chinese buyers market.”

Reflecting, Moonen concludes that from an economic perspective he might have started too early with his biodegradable packaging range. Pioneering sustainability means investing without guaranteed returns. In Moonens' case those 'millions' are mainly placed in research and development in the search for factories that want to 'stop their line to start with biodegradable raw materials'. But despite that, he has not become more reserved. That is obvious when he enthusiastically shows his latest packaging project: verge grass. The pressed cubes will, if everything goes according to plan, cover an exclusive perfume bottle. “We don't earn anything from this yet, as usual with new developments. But hopefully renewable will become the standard in the future. My father doesn't think much of 'bio, he belongs to the recycling generation. Just like many people at the helm at The Hague. Recycling is good, but only following that is short term thinking. I am convinced that we must look further. Start at the base with renewable raw materials to ensure that in the end we have a lot more options. Once that is the norm, we will lead.”

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Gwen Teo for REcentre
Interviewee / Gé Moonen, General manager

Moonen Packaging B.V.
Fahrenheitstraat 11
6003 DC Weert
Nederland

www.moonenpackaging.com

Sector • Packaging industry

Year of foundation • N/A

Number of employees • 88

Turnover (2009) •
36.7 million EUR