



The Returnable Beverage Crate: A Hi-Tech Marketing Tool

Beverage crates are almost a century old, but more alive than ever. From a simple, sturdy means of transport, it has evolved to a hi-tech marketing tool with limitless possibilities. DS Smith Plastics is the market leader in the design and production of innovative and telling beverage crates. The crates DS Smith manufactures for the beer and beverage industry play an important role in the brand awareness of their customers' products. Even the inherent sustainable nature of plastic crates is played out in the overall marketing strategy.

Beverage crates have been around since the early twenties of the previous century. In the first four decades after their birth, they were made of wood or in some cases of metal. DS Smith Plastics, then under the name of DW, was in that era a producer of wooden clogs. As a side activity the company started producing wooden beverage crates, but the success of the new product rapidly outshone the antiquated footwear. In the 1960's, DS Smith anticipated the trend of plastic consumer goods and started production of reusable plastic crates for beer, soft drinks and water. Since then DS Smith Plastics has evolved to become the market leader in reusable beverage crates, pioneering many innovations and introducing new trends. The leitmotiv is that crates have matured from being simple carriers of

bottles to functional marketing tools, which have become indispensable in the establishing of brand identities.





Primary packaging

Nowadays in Europe, beverage crates are no longer seen as a mere logistics tool for the safe transport of drinks, but as the primary packaging for the end consumer. A reusable plastic crate retains its role as sturdy, durable and safe packaging, but it has also taken up an important role in marketing and brand awareness. They are often the first impression made by a beverage. Branded crates have a unique appearance that differentiates the product from competitors, especially in present day points of sales as retailers and drive-in beverage stores. Intense competition for market shares means that beverages must stand out from the mass and create a compelling image. Product presentation and, as a result, the primary and secondary packaging, are essential for the development and maintenance of the brand. Therefore, manufacturers of plastic beverage crates must be able to remain flexible to individual customer requirements. Luckily, modern manufacturing techniques for plastic crates offer a wide variety of design options.

Tools of the trade

New innovative injection moulding techniques allow for the use of different materials and color combinations, both on the inside and outside of the crate. This gives designers a lot more creative

freedom than before. The possibility to opt for a structured surface even extends the range of choice. The top of the trade in this aspect is the use of overmoulding technology to create a truly unique crate. Further embossing or debossing can be applied to create a perfect finish... and then there is - of course - the possibility of printing. Simple screen printing can be used to integrate up to six colors, including metallic such as gold and silver. Inmould labeling, however, takes the printing possibilities to the next level. Complex graphics and even photorealistic imagery can be integrated in the crate. The technique also ensures long lasting colors and protects the image against wear and tear. Thanks to a newly patented anti-sticking label technique, remnants of barcode labels no longer stick to the crate's surface, thus preserving the image on branded crates. A final possibility is the use of a display crate with large openings. This allows for a maximized display of the packs contained, and enables the showcasing of the brand or the unique styling of the bottles.

Haptics

Not only appearance is important these days, but also the feel and overall experience play their part in the customer journey, often before the beverage is actually tasted. Modern beverage crates can incorporate features such as soft touch, a central grip or an ergonomic bottom edge. This makes the crate pleasant to grab and easy to carry, which in turn improves customer experience and stimulates impulsive buying at the POS. Consumers are also triggered



by a new look or innovative design. Innovate or die is a slogan that not only applies to the tech industry, marketers in every domain understand the truth in it. So notwithstanding the theoretical lifespan of up to twenty years, beverage producers regularly replace their crates just because a new innovation becomes possible, or in answer to a novelty introduced by a competitor. At the same time, convenience applied to reusable plastic beverage crate's design also improves the user experience and helps to generate brand loyalty. Innovation and pleasant handling can both attract new customers as sustain loyalty. Innovations such as Augmented Reality (AR) to enhance the natural environments or situations to offer perceptually enriched experiences, including visual, auditory and haptic, are waiting around the corner.

Sustainability as strategy

In today's increasingly competitive landscape, more and more companies are realizing that being sustainable is more than an environmental gesture. In

Packaging

In addition, it makes long-term economic sense. Sustainable products and initiatives generate brand value and improve a company's image. The plastic beverage crate industry was one of the first to adopt

what we now call a truly circular approach to packaging products.

Injection-moulded reusable beverage crates are highly durable and ensure a full

10-year warranty. When the crates finally reach end-of-life they can be reground up to 7 times and turned into new crates. DS Smith Plastics offers regrinding facilities at every production site, strategically located all over Europe or has the capability to regrind at any site in any location across the world through several completely autonomous mobile recycling units. These mobile units produce a lower environmental footprint because the transportation of empty crates, which contain a lot of air, is unnecessary.

The transport of the reground material is therefore six and a half times more efficient than the transport of the crates itself. Following the regrinding, the material can be stored on-site or given into storage with the beverage crate producer until the production of the new products starts. This efficient life-cycle approach cannot be found in many other types of beverage packaging. Furthermore, returnable crates go hand in hand with returnable bottles, thus avoiding the recycling of one way bottles. Therefore, using returnable beverage crates is the ideal tool to build a sustainable image and create new revenue by attracting customers who care about a company's environmental footprint. [d.w](#)

