

FOCUS ON HEALTH PAK

This Kiwi company's green credentials run more than skin deep and it's not content to stop there. It has the whole industry in its sights.

By Ellie van Baaren

When you create an average of one million products each day, all of which are single serve, marketing yourself as an environmentally friendly company in today's climate could seem a little bit of a stretch. Then again, appearances can be deceiving. What if the packaging for those products was all either locally recyclable or degradable in a landfill situation, and the formulations they contain were locally made and so simple they break down naturally? Now you're getting warmer.

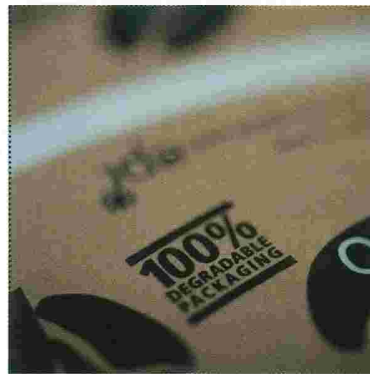
When Health Pak started in 1956, single-serve products were handy and hygienic, but now, as the world wakes up to environmental responsibility, they're likely to turn customers off rather than on. Instead of giving its products and processes a cosmetic makeover, the company embarked on several years of research, trials and tests to create products and packaging that fitted with its philosophy – from production to destruction. And that involved a lot more work than you think.

"Sugar sachets are such small pieces of paper that they can't be recycled unless you have a lot of them," says general manager Toby Whyte. "So if they're going to end up in landfill anyway, we decided it was better to make them degradable in landfill." There's an important difference between degradable and degradable in landfill. Much of the degradable packaging out there requires commercial composting, something we don't yet have in New Zealand, and the fancy material they're made out of means they can't be recycled here either. Instead, they end up with the rest of the rubbish.

As a result, Whyte says Health Pak concentrated on developing different solutions to match its products. All its bottles and caps are fully recyclable and are made on site at the company's Penrose factory. The hair and skin products use simple, fully biodegradable formulations, which not only means they break down more easily, but also that they are less likely to irritate the skin. And they are made using locally sourced active ingredients.

But great products need an audience, and one of the challenges the company faced was educating the public and potential customers. So Health Pak decided to take on this task itself, starting with offering practical advice on how to do things such as reduce waste and increase guest awareness. Hotels can order tent cards and guest book inserts that tell customers what the business is doing to be greener, and a soap recycling programme called Back to Base is offered.

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"Every property wants to be green; we're trying to make it as easy as possible for them to do it," explains Whyte. "The easier we can make it, the more they'll be able to do. Which is why we've tried to make it as transparent as possible, so that people can't say we're just trying to push our product. The education can then be transferred into action."

The soap recycling programme is an example of how something simple can involve a whole lot of work. "You can't re-use old soaps," Whyte says, "so we found two potential uses for them: biofuel, and reprocessing to kill the germs then putting them into detergent. It's a simple programme but an enormous amount of work went into it to get it to that place." Whyte points out that not all soaps can be recycled like this, but all Health Pak's soaps can.

Sales and marketing manager Jimi Kennedy-Grant says customers' decision to switch to their products comes from a variety of triggers. While smaller lodges might be responding to customer demand, the bigger businesses are already following New Zealand-made and green principles, so customer comments just reinforce that. "With the big chains, the main buying decisions are made at a head office level, but sometimes the individual hotels are allowed to look for more cost-effective local alternatives."

It's not just Health Pak's clients that need educating. "A lot of what we're doing is new, so our suppliers are learning as they go," Whyte says. And that learning will never stop. "We want to continue leading, and to do that we have to be willing to adapt, because what we're doing now may not be the best option in five years' time."

www.healthpak.co.nz ● ■

