

MICHEL FONTAINE (CNE): "WE CONSTANTLY NEED TO EXPLAIN AND REPEAT TO EVERYONE THAT PACKAGING IS NECESSARY, THAT IT DOES THE MAXIMUM WITH THE MINIMUM"

Mr. Fontaine has been President of the CNE for the past twelve years. As such, he is one of those who speak about packaging to its many stakeholders. A Sisyphean task?

Regarding packaging: how was the situation 25 years ago?

In 1992, the [Beffa-Riboud report](#) -with the participation of the French Minister Lalonde- led to the creation of Eco-Emballages. All parties (consumers, marketers, and public authorities) contributed to the emerging management of household packaging in France - while glass had started to be recycled much earlier. The [Extended Producer Responsibility](#) (EPR) scheme provided 80% funding for sorting and recycling empty household packaging.

Very quickly, it became clear that even before thinking of managing empty packaging, the best would be to produce less of it. Source reduction was the mantra of the time: not only because the European regulations required it, but rather because it was economically (less costs) and ecologically (less impact on the environment) beneficial.

The CNE emerged quite naturally from this shared will to promote prevention to the maximum. It is worth noting that source reduction was not limited to household packaging only; but applied to all packaging, whether household, industrial or commercial. The debates were perfectly rational at the time, and marketers organized themselves to reduce their packaging.

It is very difficult to give precise figures because products change over the years, but the Millennium Catalogue set up by the CNE with the Ministry of the Environment showed how to reduce the weight of packaging while continuing doing "a good job", using factual examples for years. I can testify that, in the Group where I worked, a very ambitious "Pack 2000" plan guided the work of all packaging designers.

And today?

25 years later – so just one generation later! - the situation in Europe has completely changed. We have gone from a relatively peaceful "post-Berlin War world" to an insecure world worried about its future. Between The twin towers, the financial crisis, the global warming, the eruption of digital technology and social networks, the precautionary principle, online sales, the health crisis, and the military crisis,... the world has become unpredictable with more and more impatient citizen-consumers.

Until the 2000s, packaging was "forgotten" behind the products it was designed to serve. Nowadays, packaging is the embodiment of a consumer society that is still coming to terms with its identity: "I love the products I use, but I hate the packaging that carries them". Unfortunately, packaging finds itself on the front line and is often the target of environmentalists - even though it has a minor CO2 impact - close to 2% worldwide.

In response to this new situation and in the face of an endless ideological debate, the CNE has found ways to adapt itself. It has managed to bring on board a whole new set of stakeholders. It constantly needs to justify itself and explain and repeat that packaging is necessary, that it does the maximum with the minimum, and that it has little impact on our environment. Above all, the CNE has to educate those who make the laws and put rationality back in when possible.

What place will the CNE have in 25 years, then?

To be honest, I have no idea! However, I do know that, over the centuries, packaging has adapted to the societal changes and consumption patterns that have shaped our modern world. It will undoubtedly continue to do so.