

Case study: The paper and packaging board's highly successful experiential activation

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Maria Becker

MARIA BECKER

Head of Strategy, Americas, Stein IAS, USA

Maria Becker joined renowned B2B creative agency Stein IAS in 2022 as the Head of Strategy in the Americas. With a deep passion for understanding the complexities that characterise the B2B environment, Maria strives to develop the most relevant, effective and original strategies that will help clients achieve their business goals. A true believer in collaboration, she encourages teams to work together in unison, taking advantage of the breadth of knowledge and expertise that drive best results. People, insights, data and technology are in her opinion essential to success. She pushes herself and others around her to continue expanding and adapting their skill sets — a perfect example now would be adopting AI practices into the strategy process. Prior to her role at Stein IAS, Maria worked at gyro, which ultimately became Merkle B2B, for six years. Hiscox, Amex, Samsung, Lexmark and GEHC are among the other accounts that Maria has led all through her career.

Stein IAS, New York, NY 10016-8013, USA

Tel: +1 857-260-9805; E-mail: maria.becker@steinias.com

Abstract

Sustainability is no longer a choice but a necessity, and there is starting to be a shift in consciousness that is putting pressure on both individuals and organisations to share responsibilities and intervene. This paper will explore how the Paper and Packaging Board (P+PB) and its partner Stein IAS found the most successful strategies to educate as many consumers as possible on the best ways to recycle paper and paper-based packaging. They realised that in order to communicate with consumers effectively and economically, a traditional business-to-consumer framework would not suffice. Instead, P+PB and Stein IAS embarked on a mission to follow a B2B2C framework, focusing on engaging packaging manufacturers and their e-commerce clients to reach a broader consumer audience. They understood that they had to convince box manufacturers and e-commerce brands to join the programme, known as 'Box to Nature', which aimed to inspire consumers to recycle boxes correctly, emphasising the exponential effect of proper recycling. The strategy involved showing up where the majority of the target audience was engaged, creating a relevant and bold experience. The launch of the initiative at PACK EXPO, one of the industry's largest trade shows, was a significant step in this direction. The team found a unique, powerful and relevant way to connect with the desired audience in unexpected ways, resulting in a big success that has led to a significant increase in the number of organisations wanting to join the programme.

Keywords

B2B2C, experiential marketing, digital and physical, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is a crucial imperative that requires action from everyone — from individuals to governments to businesses. The world we live in is facing an

existential moment, and we are witnessing a shift in consciousness among the population. Consumers today understand that any sustainable action as big as activism or as tribal as recycling the delivery box

they just received has an immense effect and gets us a step closer to the betterment of our planet. This change is not a coincidence but rather a necessary response to the growing threats of climate change, habitat destruction and loss of biodiversity.

It is essential that businesses, too, recognise how a sustainable approach to operations and practices is no longer a choice but a necessity. Consumers are demanding transparency and accountability. In fact, a study found that 81 per cent of consumers strongly feel that companies should help improve the environment¹ and that businesses that do not prioritise sustainability risk being left behind. This not only benefits the planet but also creates stronger connections with consumers, who prefer to support businesses that share their values.

The good news is that there is a reason for hope, with people and businesses increasingly recognising that we must all do our part to ensure that sustainability remains front and centre of our collective consciousness. The growing awareness of the long-term benefits and commitment among individuals and companies towards sustainability overcomes the potential tiredness of the topic.

One particular ray of hope, and the subject of this paper, is the work of the Paper and Packaging Board (P+PB), which has been at the forefront of educating consumers and driving preference for paper and paper-based packaging. By raising awareness of the reasons why paper is an earth-friendly choice that allows everyone to feel good about their buying decisions and by empowering many millions of consumers to recycle paper packaging, P+PB is contributing measurably and systemically to the sustainability agenda.

The important question was, how can the Paper and Packaging Board reach and communicate with US consumers

in a sustained way without spending an impossible amount of money? The answer was clear: *a business-to-consumer framework*. Here is where the systemic power of B2B marketing came into play. All it took was to convince box manufacturers and their clients (e-commerce companies) to join a new consumer recycling programme that inspires consumers to recycle boxes the right way every time. The Paper and Packaging Board and Stein IAS embarked on a mission to convince this audience about the exponential effect this action could have.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PAPER-BASED PACKAGING TO THE PLANET

Before diving into the steps P+PB took to solve the challenge of getting manufacturers on board, let us understand the situation. The climate crisis looms larger than ever, and with it comes an increased demand for more sustainable packaging solutions. The Paper and Packaging Board has been advocating for paper as the responsible choice since 2014, and for good reason. Paper is a highly recyclable material. This is due in part to the simple and environmentally friendly processes used to turn paper into a recycled product, as well as the ease with which it can be sorted and recycled. Paper, in fact, is the most recycled material in the United States, with more paper being recycled than metals and plastics combined. According to the United States Energy Department, plastics are only recycled at a rate of 9 per cent, in stark contrast to 68 per cent in the case of paper-based packaging.²

Another important factor to consider is that paper fibres can be recycled up to seven times, signifying that by progressively improving the recovery rates with greater efficiency, we can obtain more fibre to develop new products. This is

representative of the circular economy in action, where waste is minimised and resources are conserved.

Furthermore, paper promotes sustainable forestry, which is a crucial aspect of environmental conservation and responsible resource management. Sustainable forests balance harvesting with planting and ensure that forested habitat is not lost, and forests continue to provide a range of ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity, water quality and quantity, and recreation.

The paper and packaging industry plays a vital role in promoting sustainable forestry through responsible forest management because it is the source of the raw material used to make paper products. The industry especially works with private landowners who own and sustainably manage 56 per cent of forestland in the United States, which amounts to 445m acres.³ Private landowners play a crucial role in preserving our planet, contributing economic and environmental benefits, including purifying 25 per cent of the nation's water supply, reducing pollution by offsetting US carbon dioxide emissions and providing habitats for wildlife and plants.⁴ Sixty per cent of America's at-risk wildlife rely on private forests.⁵

Responsible forestry contributes to planting nearly 3m trees in America every day and grows nearly twice the volume harvested annually.⁶ But the industry's commitment extends beyond the forest to the entire supply chain. The focus is on promoting sustainable manufacturing practices, such as using renewable energy and reducing waste, to ensure that the environmental toll of paper production is minimised.

By choosing paper and paper packaging, businesses can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and the environment as a whole and build

stronger connections with their consumers. By recycling paper-based packaging, consumers can actively contribute to a sustainable future.

THE NEED TO OVERCOME INERTIA

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the actions we take as individuals and as a society can have a profound effect on the environment. One area where this is particularly true is e-commerce, which has grown massively and is a long-lasting effect the COVID-19 pandemic has left behind.

With online sales expected to exceed US\$1.1tn in the United States alone in 2023,⁷ the amount of packaging waste generated by home deliveries is at unprecedented levels. The resulting need for sustainable practices, particularly when it comes to packaging materials, has never been more pressing.

Because of this shift in how people buy and consume goods, the responsibility of recycling has been put in the hands of consumers. While this responsibility has largely fallen on consumers, many are left feeling overwhelmed or confused about the steps they can take to make a difference. Despite the potential simplicity and benefits of recycling, it is estimated that only 40 per cent of consumer recyclable material is actually recovered.⁸ And with two in three (63 per cent) consumers admitting that they do not always recycle, the need for education and awareness is clear.⁹

But why is this the case? For many, the problem is not a lack of willingness to do their part, but rather the obstacles that stand in their way. From confusing regulations to inconvenient collection methods, recycling can often feel like more trouble than it is worth. In fact, 46 per cent of consumers say they would recycle more often if it was not so much work.¹⁰

So what can be done to address this? One solution is to focus on the most easily recyclable material: paper. With its long life cycle, sustainable forestry practices — along with the industry's US\$7bn investment¹¹ in recycling infrastructure — paper is the material that both businesses and consumers can get behind. With 66 per cent of consumers indicating a willingness to pay more for sustainable packaging,¹² there is a clear business case, as well as a social responsibility case, for packaging manufacturers to follow suit.

But how can we make sure this message is being delivered to consumers and manufacturers loud and clear? By working with businesses to promote the use of sustainable paper packaging and by educating consumers about the benefits of recycling and steps to take to recycle easily and correctly, a more sustainable future for all is within reach, even amid surging e-commerce.

And this is where the power of storytelling comes in. By sharing stories of the fallout of our actions on the environment and highlighting the benefits of sustainable practices, change can be inspired in a way that statistics and facts alone cannot. From the beauty of a forest protected by sustainable forestry practices to the

satisfaction of knowing that our recycling efforts are making a real difference, these stories can motivate us to take action and make a difference.

THE BOX TO NATURE INITIATIVE

Box to Nature is a residential recycling initiative that was conceived by the Paper and Packaging Board as a direct response to increased online shopping, with the objective of engaging consumers and educating them on the importance of recycling paper and paper packaging properly, every single time.

The programme involves a simple mark that appears on corrugated boxes (Figure 1) that is designed to both continually encourage consumers to recycle and educate them as to why and how. Importantly, the mark features a QR code that leads to a digital experience that reminds consumers of the simple, easy steps to recycle correctly. The mark also serves as a reminder of the effect your individual actions can have on the world around us.

P+PB and its B2B ad agency partner Stein IAS collaborated to identify the most effective ways to reach as many people as possible with the Box to Nature programme.



Figure 1 Sample mark and QR code



Figure 2 Are you a super recycler quiz example

Once the consumers scan the QR codes, they are directed to a digital experience that starts with a simple, one question quiz — which changes every time you access the site — to answer the question ‘Are you a super recycler?’ (Figure 2).

Once the consumer views the results, they are offered different resources to find more information on how to properly recycle and how to become a ‘super’ recycler and other useful content.

The Paper and Packaging Board conducted a survey to understand how consumers would react to the mark, and a whopping 75 per cent of consumers tested agreed that they would be more likely to recycle after seeing the message.

But to make Box to Nature effective, we needed to reach as many consumers as possible. This could be achieved by convincing box manufacturers to put the mark on their e-commerce packaging. Further, the Box to Nature initiative requires a push and pull approach, meaning that it was important to get box manufacturers to ‘sell’ the programme through to their end customers (e-commerce brands) and for these brands to ask their box suppliers to include the mark on their boxes.

DELIVERING AN EFFECTIVE LAUNCH

Launching a new sustainability initiative can be a daunting task, especially when it involves so many different audiences and is part of such a crucial dialogue. The challenge lies not just in getting the message out but in finding ways to engage people and encourage them to become part of the conversation. At Stein IAS and the Paper and Packaging Board, we knew that we needed to create a unique aperture that would enable people to see, feel and touch our initiative so that they could embrace it and become part of the solution.

And what better way to achieve this than by taking the initiative to the biggest packaging trade show in the industry? PACK EXPO is attended by over 45,000 people, making it one of the most significant events in the world of packaging. Our goal was simple: to talk to as many brands and manufacturers as possible about the Box to Nature programme and the difference that participating can make to the plant’s future.

The 2022 PACK EXPO included a central educational exhibition with a ‘PACK to the Future’ thematic, and we decided to build off that theme and put paper-based packaging at the centre of the

conversation, highlighting how innovation is at the heart of the next generation of sustainability. We wanted manufacturers, shippers and brands to see the paper and packaging industry as collaborative innovators who would partner with them to deliver solutions to meet their sustainability goals.

There is a misconception that B2B marketing is only about communicating specific products and solutions to an audience that only cares about the technicalities that lead to tactical and bland messages. The reality is that people are still people, whether you are engaging them at a personal or at a business level. They are still making emotional decisions, which is why in B2B we are increasingly looking at pop culture — as consumer marketers usually do — to develop campaigns and experiences that are highly relevant and accessible, rising above the mundane.

A diverse team of creative thinkers at Stein IAS constituted of strategy, account management, content creators and, of course, creative writers and designers came together to brainstorm ideas that could help cut through the noise at PACK EXPO 2022 and draw people to our booth. It is not often that you are presented with the opportunity of having your entire target audience together in one physical space. However, we needed to put ourselves in the shoes of those thousands of attendees that were going to be inundated with information and chased by salespeople who want to get a few precious seconds of their time to try to make their presence felt.

When it comes to concepting, no idea is too crazy. In fact, it is encouraged to keep the average of the market from holding you back and thinking big within the realm of what you have to work with and always bearing in mind whom you are talking to. You want to think about

the entire experience — be emotional by capturing the imagination but also provide relevant and actionable information. We did just that and played off the Pack to the Future theme, tapping into popular culture, creating a to-scale DeLorean made entirely of paper, and placed it in a fully recyclable booth constructed from corrugated cardboard. Each tyre on the car involved more than four hundred cardboard folds.

In order to pull off the creation of the cardboard DeLorean, we partnered with a vendor that built the car from scratch. The car was assembled mostly on-site at our partner's headquarters, then transported to Chicago and re-assembled for the event. This was something that had never been done before and took a real leap of faith, which ultimately ended up being a massive success. Being in sync with your partners throughout the entire journey as well as being mindful of the timeline is decisive to ensure the stunt will work out. This experience reflected how taking considered risks gets rewarded.

We also created a virtual reality experience hosted by our own 'Doc' that put attendees in the driver's seat and hurtled them to a sustainable future made possible by the programme's efforts. The VR experience was filmed from the interior of the car, which really added to the immersion as the car sprang to life as a living time machine. The fact that it was a time machine was very important and far more than a gimmick as it brought people to what the future could look like if we all did our part regarding sustainability. This was an additional step to get people to fully see and feel the weight of their business and themselves on the planet.

The Paper and Packaging Board was originally invited by PACK EXPO to join its innovation exhibit. Once they heard our concept, however, they believed

it was a showstopper and deserved to have its own space in one of the highest-traffic areas of the event space (Figure 3).

The VR experience was designed to be immersive, fun and engaging. Attendees would start in the driver's seat of our corrugated DeLorean, with our mad scientist appearing as a hologram to transport them through a wormhole to a sustainable future. Using 3D world-building techniques, the

experience explained why packagers and brands should put the Box to Nature mark on their boxes. The five-minute experience proved to be one of the highlights of the event, drawing people to our booth via the extraordinary buzz it created. (It was *the* social media photo opportunity for PACK EXPO.) (Figure 4).

But the DeLorean and the VR experience were just one aspect of the

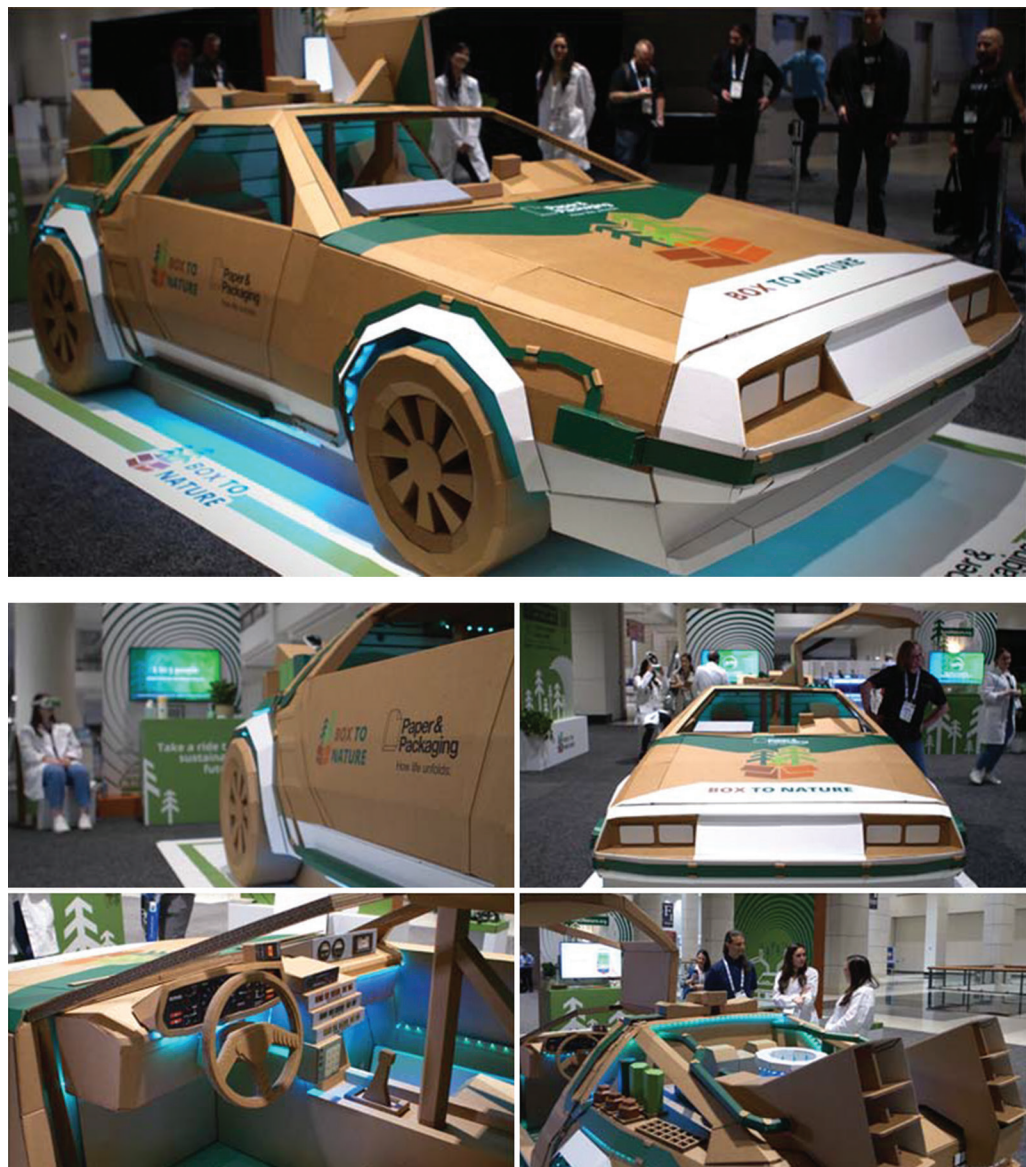


Figure 3 Cardboard DeLorean featured at PACK EXPO



Figure 4 Attendees enjoying VR experience

overall strategy. Our tradeshow presence also included videos, handouts, Google Cardboard and a photobooth with e-mail capture. We supported the booth with pre-, at and post-event social ads; digital display advertising; and e-mail outreach. The booth itself provided multiple, multi-sensory ways to engage, with experts on hand to answer all questions. The photobooth enabled visitors to take a picture with the DeLorean, have it printed and also send it to their e-mails, where they could immediately share it on social media. It acted as a great way to draw people into the booth, instead of just admiring it from outside.

In all, it was a significant undertaking for P+PB, but one with an even more significant return on investment. The success of the event proved once again the importance of establishing emotional connectivity with the audience to inspire people to take action. (As a side note, we were amazed by the number of people who used to or currently own a DeLorean and have such a strong emotional connection with the car!)

THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAMME

The Paper and Packaging Board and Box to Nature were the stars of the show at PACK EXPO, attracting crowds of

attendees to its fully recyclable booth and all-paper DeLorean for an immersive VR experience that left them wowed. It is no surprise that everyone was talking about it! With its Box to Nature programme, the Paper and Packaging Board has placed itself at the forefront of the sustainability dialogue in the industry, and the response has been remarkable.

It is important to remind ourselves of the lengthy sales cycle this initiative has — first, we need to get manufacturers to adopt the programme and then convince their customers to change the art and branding of their boxes. We need to be consistent in our communication and reach to achieve these changes. Since PACK EXPO, however, we have already seen some significant changes. There has been a 30 per cent increase in the number of companies involved in the programme. As much as we cannot directly associate all that increase with the booth and experience alone, over 600 companies expressed their eagerness to be part of the Box to Nature programme after the event. In the first quarter of 2023, the Box to Nature mark had already been featured over a staggering 14m boxes. With 5 times the projected growth in 2023, the programme is ramping up with remarkable pace and momentum. Additionally, since the event, there has been a 200 per cent increase in QR code scans.

It is inspiring to see the positive effect that a dedicated initiative like the Box to Nature programme can have not only on the environment but also on the industry and consumers. With so many companies eager to participate and do their part, it is clear that the Paper and Packaging Board has struck a chord with its mission to educate and engage consumers to recycle their paper and paper packaging the right way, every time.

And as of the real life-size cardboard DeLorean, we had many interested parties throughout the course of PACK EXPO to take with them the corrugated car. One person, in particular, owned a recycling plant and wanted to display the car as the heights paper/corrugated could reach. This individual managed to ship the car from Chicago to their plant in Cincinnati, where it lives on display to this day.

We cannot wait to see what the future holds for this groundbreaking programme and the Paper and Packaging Board as they continue to drive innovation and sustainability forward in the industry.

SUMMARY

Business-to-business and business-to-consumer strategies and engagements need to be engaged in harmony to achieve successful outcomes: In this case, the Paper and Packaging Board and Stein IAS were posed the challenges of encouraging consumers to buy paper-packaged goods and recycle all paper in a responsible way. By targeting paper packaging manufacturers and persuading them to add the Box to Nature mark to their boxes, they were able to reach millions of consumers.

The power of experience and human connection: The deft interweave of analog and digital experiences is an undeniable talent that, when executed correctly, can lead to incredible outcomes. When people get the

chance to escape the office and attend an event, they expect to be able to appreciate items and information in a different and unexpected way. By bridging the digital and analog worlds we enabled the audience to see, feel and touch the Box to Nature initiative.

Do not be afraid of being original, bold and loud — especially in B2B: Sustainability is not just a buzzword or a passing trend but rather a crucial imperative that requires action. Gaining mindshare around this topic with businesses, most specifically around paper-based packaging, is extremely hard. What made the Paper and Packaging Board stand out during the Box to Nature launch was the unique and brash creative idea that tapped into everyday culture and ignited a sense of connection and melancholy with the audience.

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