



The permanent lifecycle of the drinks can

We rely on the planet's resources for our way of life, but global resources are limited, yet society's demands are increasing. Prioritising the management of these resources efficiently and sustainably is becoming an increasingly important issue.

One popular solution that has been identified and put into action is to choose more sustainable packaging options, particularly for beverages. The idea being that products are produced and packaged in a way that is thoughtful to our resources and results in reducing waste that damages the environment.

The role of metals

Recycling materials has long been an important part of sustainable living to reduce waste and the use of energy. Aluminium specifically has long been a leader in recycling because it is a permanently available material that can be recycled again and again, without losing any quality of its structural integrity. It can be reformed and transformed infinitely. What may start out as a drinks can, can then be reused and recycled; melted down and then turned into another can for example, or an iron, a car or perhaps even an airplane wing.

Aluminium beverage cans have now been certified as the world's most recycled drinks container which was announced at the recent Smithers Pira Sustainability in Packaging Europe Conference in Barcelona. Seven out of 10 drinks cans sold in the UK are already being recycled, with the industry ever striving to increase this, and a staggering 75% of all aluminium ever produced is still in use today. Metal Packaging Europe (MPE) also recently revealed that the global weighted average recycling rate for aluminium is 69%, compared to PET at 43% and glass at 46%.

The success of recycling aluminium is not just down to conscientious industries or consumers, it is also down to the fact that aluminium cans are much more valuable than other packaging materials, making the recycling of drinks cans easily financially viable and self-sustaining. The value of recycled materials can vary. For glass, for example, New Scientist recently stated that "waste managers often have to pay recyclers to take glass off their hands" (19.7.17).

But it's not just aluminium that's proven to be a 'green' hit - steel for packaging recorded an average European recycling rate of 78% in 2015, a record performance, which included five countries exceeding 85%. With greater focus being placed on packaging in the media, consumers are now more concerned than ever about the waste being produced and are keen to be informed with statistics such as this, knowing that their choice of purchase meets their environmental expectations.

So what makes a drinks can sustainable?

- It's infinitely recyclable – otherwise known as a permanently available material that can be reused again and again for multiple purposes
- It doesn't lose its structural integrity in the recycling process
- Aluminium cans are 100 per cent recyclable
- Cans are cube efficient – they are more easily stacked than bottles, taking up less room and ultimately reducing the size and number of shipments needed, therefore less fuel is needed for transportation



- Metal, as a highly recycled permanent material, saves raw materials, energy consumption and CO2 emissions
- Making one aluminium beverage can from raw materials uses the same amount of energy that it takes to recycle 20 ([Novelis](#))
- Recycled aluminium has exactly the same properties as new – but takes just five per cent of the energy to produce ([Alupro](#))

Use, recover, regenerate

Beverage cans fit into the circular economy – where resources are used, recovered and regenerated. Permanent materials like drinks cans are the building blocks for the circular economy. If you heat aluminium or steel scrap in a recycling facility to the point where it melts, what comes out is completely the same as what went in because metal is unalterable structurally. It's then kept in use at its highest utility and value for as long as possible, ensuring that the maximum usage out of metal through recycling is achieved. This continuous recycling and re-using process is also defined as 'real recycling'.

It's not just the responsibility of conscientious consumers however to create a functioning circular economy, there is a need for the right legislative framework to be in place. It is inherent in a circular economy that it starts and ends with a new product that can be recycled again and again. Recycling rates are a good indicator of whether or not recyclates are used for new applications. Packaging and packaging waste policies should be based on sound life-cycle assessments. In a circular economy this means the focus should be on multiple-life-cycles.

Their endless recyclability makes drinks cans a valuable material source for reintroduction into the economy to make new products and components, multiple times. The entire aluminium can can be melted down and re-purposed. As metal is so versatile, it can be recycled and reincarnated into:

- Car and aeroplane components
- Window frames
- Kettles
- Engine parts
- Drinks cans
- Other food packaging...

These multiple lifecycles are where cans stand out over other packaging forms. Whilst all of the drinks cans produced can be re-used for a multitude of purposes, the UK recycling industry will soon struggle to recycle all of the glass bottles used because the UK imports more green glass wine bottles, for example, than it uses. That means there is an greater amount that needs to be recycled, with limited second uses currently possible.

Recognising real recycling

Whilst current recycling and sustainability numbers are encouraging, there remains much to do to reach the 2020 metal packaging industry's own ambition of an 80% European average rate. Metal packaging must be fully recognised in the consumers' eyes as the model for real recycling. To reach this objective, consumer engagement campaigns, like [EveryCanCounts](#) and [MetalMatters](#), are crucial to demonstrate that cans can be the best option when it comes to managing resources for drinks packaging and reducing its environmental impact.



Can
Makers
Metal Packaging Europe