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Beverage packaging is becoming lightweight

As the world's leading trade fair for processing and packaging solutions, *interpack will once again bring together the international players involved in bottling, canning and packaging beverages in 2026. This sector, too, is currently driven by regulatory requirements such as the European Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, ambitious sustainability targets set by manufacturers and changes in consumer behaviour.*

Traditional beverage packaging such as bottles made from glass or PET, aluminium cans and drinks cartons are changing: today, a maximum reduction in material, intelligent barrier functions, digital process control and improved recyclability are among the requirements for new generations of beverage packaging systems.

Weight reduction is a major topic. interpack exhibitor KHS, for example, is pursuing a "premium lightweight" approach and presents Premium Lite, a bottle for still mineral water made of 100 per cent recycled PET, weighing in at just 6.2 grams for 0.25 litres. The new bottle is designed to combine a minimum use of materials with high-quality aesthetics and has been specifically tailored to the requirements of modern high-speed production lines. This lightweight is produced on the advanced KHS InnoPET Blomax Series V stretch blow-moulding machine, which ensures process stability for large quantities with high precision.

KHS Supreme combines PET with a wafer-thin inner coating of glass. Image: KHS

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When it comes to product protection and the circular economy, KHS is taking things even further with its new Supreme PET bottle. Here, the company employs its own Plasmax technology, which applies a silicon oxide coating that is less than 100 nanometres thick to the bottle's inner wall. The coating acts like glass, protecting oxygen-sensitive drinks – such as high-quality green tea – from oxidation and extending their shelf lives many times over. At the same time, the bottle is still fully recyclable, as during the recycling process, the glass layer is removed in an alkaline solution without contaminating the PET. The combination of maximum product protection, rPET compatibility and industrial production speeds of up to 60,000 bottles per hour illustrates the extent to which barrier technologies have now evolved towards a circular economy.

Easily recyclable labels

Along with a reduction in materials, the question of the recyclability of individual components is becoming increasingly important. As an exhibitor at interpack 2026, CCL Label focuses on innovations in the circular economy and shows how packaging design can actively support recycling systems. In the area of label and sleeve technology, the company opts for concepts that support recycling. EcoFloat, for example, is a shrink sleeve solution based on low-density polyolefin. During the sink float PET recycling process, the sleeve material floats while the PET flakes sink; this physical separability is crucial in high-quality bottle-to-bottle recycling. Another new feature is the EcoFloat White option for light-sensitive products, which allows bottlers to switch from opaque HDPE or PET packaging to clear PET bottles.

The EcoFloat White option allows bottlers to switch from opaque HDPE or PET packaging to clear PET bottles. Image: CCL Label

With its WashOff labels, CCL also addresses the requirements of industrial washing processes in the reuse and refill sector. These pressure-sensitive labels can be removed in a lye bath without leaving any residue and thus support reusable glass and PET systems. In addition, the new EcoShear adhesive technology improves the recyclability of single-use glass bottles, as self-adhesive film labels are almost completely removable.

The WashOff labels can be removed from reusable bottles without leaving any residue. Image: CCL Label

An adhesive for high-speed labelling

Finally, the composition of supposedly minor components is also gaining in importance. With a new hot-melt adhesive that does not contain mineral oil, Henkel Adhesive Technologies offers a solution with a removal rate of up to 98 per cent in the recycling process. Residue is separated from the material flow together with the remains of the labels. The hot-melt adhesive solution is compatible for both paper and plastic labels and ensures smooth operation at high speeds of up to 40,000 bottles per hour while maintaining low processing temperatures of 110 to 140°C. This protects equipment, saves energy and increases operational reliability.

Technomelt EM 335 RE contains no mineral oil, is almost completely removable in the recycling process and is PETCYCLE-approved. Image: Henkel

Replacing labels with laser marks

However, you can also do without labels: last year, Krones developed DecoBeam, a solution for marking PET and rPET bottles directly. Relevant information such as the product's net quantity, ingredients, best-before date and design elements are laser marked directly onto the bottles – saving material and making packaging easier to recycle. Two laser marking methods are available: CO2 lasers result in a more white-ish colour, while fibre lasers produce black lettering. Logos, graphics and design elements can also be depicted alongside the text.

Relevant information is laser marked directly onto the bottle. Image: Krones

Krones also offers an alternative to classic labels for glass containers: INKpression transfers ink directly onto the containers themselves. What makes this application so special is that the ink is not applied through a classic printing process: the finished design is peeled off backing material and transferred onto the container as a whole.

Boom in cans continues

The drinks can has been gaining in popularity for years. For example, sales of canned soft and energy drinks are currently experiencing a boom, particularly among younger target groups. In Europe, drinks cans also have a good recycling rate: over 76 per cent in 2023 and rising, according to figures from two European associations, namely Metal Packaging Europe (MPE) and European Aluminium (EA). Deposit systems have a significant effect here: countries with deposit-return systems achieve recycling rates of up to 90 per cent.

The demand for beverages in cans is increasing. Image: Coca-Cola / Uli Deck

Many beverage manufacturers are currently expanding their range of cans. This year, for example, Coca-Cola Europacific Partners Germany (CCEP DE) is investing in a new canning line at its Halle location, which is expected to go into operation in the summer of 2026, when it will supplement the two existing bottling lines for non-carbonated beverages in PET bottles. With this multi-million investment, Coca-Cola is responding to an increased demand: last year, sales of canned beverages increased by around 12 per cent compared to the previous year on the German market alone.

Drinks cartons with a good LCA

When it comes to drinks cartons, opinions often differ despite the fact that this form of packaging combines state-of-the-art technology: it is lightweight, opaque, recyclable and around three quarters of its material consists of cardboard fibre – supplemented by barriers that ensure the product is protected and help extend shelf lives. According to the German Association of Manufacturers of Carton Packaging for Liquid Foods (Fachverband Kartonverpackung für flüssige Nahrungsmittel e.V., FKN), when it comes to recycling, the industry is more advanced than many believe; the drinks carton has long been part of a functioning cycle, thanks to association companies Tetra Pak, SIG Combibloc and Elopak as well as the Palurec recycling plant at Knapsack Chemical Park. In Germany, around 36,000 tonnes of plastic and aluminium from drinks cartons are thus recycled every year. However, this is still not enough to meet the legally required quotas, and thus, according to current figures from the Central Agency Packaging Register (Zentrale Stelle Verpackungsregister, ZSVR), Germany failed to meet the recycling quota for the third time in a row in 2024.

More eco-friendly than their reputation would have you believe: drinks cartons. Image: FKN

Tethered caps unpopular

As a study by the Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions (NIM) shows, a majority of consumers find tethered caps impractical. Since mid-2024, single-use beverage packaging must be fitted with these tops, which remain attached to the packaging after opening. The aim is to reduce plastic waste and facilitate recycling. However, two thirds of respondents criticised the cumbersome handling – especially when drinking and pouring.

Numerous international exhibitors will demonstrate how to package beverages safely, appealingly and sustainably at interpack in Düsseldorf from 7 to 13 May 2026. Further information on the trade fair is available at www.interpack.de.