

# How to make a name for yourself

Developers and producers of biobased materials must work with big, well-known retail brand owners to build a market for biomaterials

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**W**e can already demonstrate that biobased materials are a more sustainable alternative to fossil-based chemicals and “petroplastics” in many applications. Still, we have a long way to go until biomaterials break into the mainstream.

Today, biobased materials make up only a small fraction of the chemical and plastics market. Yet there is no shortage of technology and companies offering effective biobased alternatives to petro-based products. So why is the market still so niche? What will it take to make biobased products a reality?

Apart from some high-profile cases like Coca-Cola’s *PlantBottle*, which was a marketing success story both for the Coke brand and the biomaterials companies associated with it, many brands are testing materials but not communicating this externally.

If we want brands to go beyond a “wait and see” approach and communicate with their customers on the benefits of biomaterials, we need to educate them. Traditionally, the chemical industry has not communicated much to end consumers and the smaller biobased players do not have the budgets to run public information campaigns single-handedly.

Consumer brands have the “touch points” to consumers that raw material producers and their communicators can only dream of. Educating brands may sound simple enough, but it is a new approach for many in the chemical industry. As such, it is already causing a shake-up in the traditional chemical value chain as producers of biobased chemicals, eg biosuccinic acid, are skipping steps in the value chain to work on application development and marketing directly with consumer brands and material suppliers.

A recent example of such cooperation is the announcement from our client Reverdia and Covestro on the launch of *Desmopan* thermoplastic polyurethanes based on Reverdia’s

*Biosuccinium*. This type of partnership demonstrates how small biobased chemical producers are disrupting the incumbent petrochemical industry value chain.

By building a dialogue with consumer brands, we have the opportunity not just to educate the end consumer about biomaterials but also to rebuild trust in the chemical and plastics industry once more.

In its 2015 Trust Barometer, public relations company Edelman wrote, “Building trust is essential to successfully bringing new products and services to market”, adding that companies need to “demonstrate clear personal and societal benefits, behave with integrity and engage with customers and stakeholders throughout the process.”



**“Marketing biobased materials is a delicate balancing act between visibility and credibility”**

**KATHRYN SHERIDAN**  
CEO and founder, Sustainability Consult

The public’s trust in the cleantech sector was at 68%, compared to nuclear energy at 41%. Looking forward, I would be happy for the public to be sufficiently aware of biomaterials for Edelman to be able to compare the trust level between biomaterials and petrochemicals.

## MATERIALS MATTER

Biobased is an evolution both in how we make products and how we make the subject of materials exciting. At the Sustainable Brands’ pan-European conference (SB’15) in London in November, I led its first ever panel on biomaterials, with a clear message being that “materials matter”. Choosing biomateri-

als over petrochemicals can considerably lower a product’s carbon footprint. Some biomaterials also offer performance advantages, for example polyethylene furanoate (PEF) offers better barrier resistance than polyethylene terephthalate (PET), a clear benefit for the shelf life of fizzy drinks.

Naturally, there is competition between different biomaterials – and particularly between drop-ins and novel materials – and also with recycled petro-based materials. For example, IKEA has set targets to use 100% recycled or renewable plastic by 2020 but with no clear split between recycled and biobased.

A known material like recycled PET would probably be seen as an easier option for IKEA than introducing new materials. This reinforces the importance of joint application development with biomaterial producers and consumer brands.

We cannot say that biobased materials are always more sustainable than conventional materials, particularly when comparing with recycled plastics and other materials. Bio is not automatically better. To confuse the consumer further, there is too much buzzword bingo around terminology, eg renewable, biobased, biodegradable, compostable, green, etc. At Sustainability Consult, we know first-hand that marketing biobased materials is a delicate balancing act between visibility and credibility.

Visibility is important for companies looking to build a market and sell products. But visibility without credibility is a short-term goal. Sustainability claims must be backed up by data and stakeholder dialogue.

If we want consumers to recognise the benefits of biobased chemicals and plastics, so they start to demand them from their favourite brands – and even pay a small price premium for them – we need to educate brands and consumers in a credible and transparent way. ■

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