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GSCF World Congress: Environmental Sustainability In Consumer Health

by David Ridley

The third session on day one of the GSCF's World Congress 2022 focused on sustainability and featured contributions from Haleon, Bayer, AESGP, and the UN.

For the consumer health industry, sustainability is an issue “we can’t ignore,” insisted Haleon’s chief marketing officer Tamara Rogers, at the beginning of the third session on day one of the 2022 Global Self-Care Federation World Congress.

“We can no longer use quality and safety as an excuse,” Rogers continued, referring to the exceptions that have been so far granted to the pharmaceutical industry for maintaining the integrity, safety and quality of medicines through packaging.

Rogers’ session co-chair Juan Thompson – director general of the Latin American Association of Responsible Self-Care – agreed, adding that no company can meet this challenge alone.

“We need to work together as a sector,” he commented.

Sustainability Charter

To this end, AESGP director general Jūratė Švarcaitė presented the GSCF’s Global Charter for Environmental Sustainability, published at the end of 2021. (Also see “[GSCF Launches Global Self-Care Industry Sustainability Charter](#)” - HBW Insight, 25 Nov, 2021.)

The charter represents the sustainability commitments of GSCF members, including consumer health manufacturers and national associations, and is the consumer healthcare industry’s “first commitment to drive sustainable self-care,” Švarcaitė noted.

The charter, she explained, focuses on three priority areas where the industry has the greatest

impact and influence: plastics and packaging, pharmaceuticals in the environment and CO2 footprint. (Also see "[Over The Counter 10 Jan 2022: Greening The Global OTC Industry With Jurate Švarcaite](#)" - HBW Insight, 10 Jan, 2022.)

Since the publication of the charter, Švarcaitė said that GSCF has been collecting and amplifying via social media pledges from OTC industry associations and companies.

Švarcaitė urged congress participants, whether GSCF members or not, to make their own pledges, no matter where their companies are on their own sustainability journeys.

As for next steps, Švarcaitė revealed that the GSCF sustainability taskforce – which she co-chairs with Bayer Consumer Health's global head of public affairs, science & sustainability, Daniella Foster – is now concentrating on the difficult problem of making blister packs recyclable.

"We are looking at how we can solve this collectively," she said. "We believe this would be a very significant problem to solve in terms of sustainability." (Also see "[Bayer Challenges Sustainability Buffs To Develop Packaging Alternatives](#)" - HBW Insight, 18 Oct, 2022.)

P&G Sees Benefits

Moving beyond non-recyclable plastics was also a major theme of Paul Gama's contribution to the panel.

Global president of personal healthcare at Procter & Gamble, Gama said that redesigning the company's self-care brands to be more sustainable is saving roughly 3,000 tons of virgin plastics a year.

But more importantly, it is also driving business growth. "The shelf impact has been tremendous," Gama revealed.

"The last time some of these product packs were redesigned was in the 1950s. So, it's given us an opportunity to update the packaging, which has in turn driven sales," he continued. "The net result: cost savings, sales increases, and we're achieving our sustainability goals."

UN Offers Guidance

The session was closed by Brian Mubiwa, a South African representative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Mubiwa applauded the GSCF's work on sustainability, and the steps within the consumer health industry to operationalize the charter's commitments.

Offering some constructive feedback from UNEP, Mubiwa suggested that companies could

consider the different types of packaging used in the pharmaceutical industry: primary (which is in direct contact with the drug), secondary (which houses the primary packaging) and tertiary (used for bulk supply), to determine what kind of sustainability intervention would be most effective.

In some cases, companies may have to redesign products – which as P&G’s Gama noted can help grow OTC brands – or create mechanisms for post-packaging recovery, such as Terracycle’s Loop system that allows OTC products to be bought, used, and then dropped off in big box stores where consumers regularly shop. (Also see "[Over the Counter 9 June 2022: Reusable Packaging For Consumer Health Goods With Annika Greve](#)" - HBW Insight, 9 Jun, 2022.)

To make the latter approach effective, Mubiwa pointed out that consumers will also need to change their behavior. However, consumers across the world currently show a “limited awareness” of proper disposal routes, he warned. (Also see "[GSK Launches Campaign To Help Germans Use OTC Drugs Correctly](#)" - HBW Insight, 27 Oct, 2021.)

In conclusion, Mubiwa said that GSCF should consider becoming part of UNEP’s Business and Industry working group.

“Partnerships provide long-term, broad-based support for UNEP’s activities and aims,” he noted, and by including organizations like GSCF, UNEP in turn acknowledges that “environmental challenges are solved by bringing all stakeholders to the decision making table.”