

K-FAIR blog by Searious Business, to be published on 17 October 2019

Giants in plastics industry

'The K'. Also known as the 'K-FAIR': an icon in the plastics industry. For decades, the whole plastics industry has gathered at this fair every three years to discuss the latest developments and recent assets in the realm of polymers. If you are a relevant player in the market, showing your newest innovations at the K Fair in Germany has become an absolute must.

So of course, I had to be there. After all, with Searious Business we want to make the difference in the world of plastics. And we cannot do it alone - we align and codevelop together with industry players. So let's check out what the global plastic giants are really doing to prevent plastic waste. I was getting curious, after hearing so many ambitious goals and visions stated in initiatives like 'The Global Alliance to End Plastic Waste', Plastic Pacts, 'Line in the sand' commitment of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the proclamations at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, was the plastics industry really moving, too?

I was warned. "You can easily spend the entire week on the fair and still not see it all." But my focus was clear: looking for true innovations in the use of plastics, resulting in avoiding plastic waste and creating a closed loop on plastics. After all, circular economy typically starts at the front-end, in design and selection of materials.

After having spent a full day of targeted research, I was disappointed to find that although 'sustainability' was one of the four key pillars of this year's 'K', not one major plastic player has implemented circular economy in the heart of its business operations.

Indeed, some of them have started highly visible (sometimes one-off) projects including collaborations improving waste infrastructure. Others have incorporated recycled content to attract more sales. And a few have set targets on getting to a fixed percentage of sales from 'circular solutions'.

However, none of them have taken the challenge to the next level: to fully commit to moving away from virgin plastics. With fossil resources running out, CO2 levels rising and plastic pollution becoming a key concern for individuals, governments and businesses, it would only make sense.

Instead, plastic producers and converters seem to be stuck in their status quo and ready-made investments. It seems we need to put a whole lot more pressure on the industry to move the needle towards effective change.

I know, there really are a few companies out there that are putting their best effort in to make that shift. In this case the 'how' is the real issue, and it is here that game-changers can play a crucial role in using breakthrough technologies and building bridges.

So where are all the innovators we need so much? I know they are there - we exchange ideas regularly on platforms like the Solar Impulse Foundation and Ubuntu. So how come they are not present at the 'K', where they are very much needed?

It may come as no surprise to learn they are increasingly finding their way to the 'top of the food chain' in plastics: with the brand owners. Brand owners are the key decision makers in determining which design and material will be used in the products and packaging they put on the market. Although some of them keep relying on what their current suppliers tell them is (im)possible, others go out and proclaim what their customers really want: sustainable packaging by 2025 at the latest.

More and more, disruptive innovations start without conventional players from plastics industry involved. Look at the whole shift towards reusable packaging, modular electronic devices from recycled content in collaboration with e-waste companies, and closed loop initiatives including 3D-printing design furniture from packaging waste.

What does this tell me?

Change is coming. No question about it. Brand owners are increasingly involving disruptive thinkers and innovative solution providers. During the panel I will join at the 'K' this Saturday, I will discuss next steps for involvement with Global Alliance to End Plastic Waste, World Plastics Council and Borealis.

So not only do we need the plastic giants to join - the plastics industry may need innovators even

more than they now recognize, as others will fill the gap where they don't. I look forward to the follow-up of this year's K and hope to see a lot more real action these coming months, so NEXT year will deliver more tangible results.