

Belgian Packaging Institute: testing and knowledge-transfer

The Belgian Packaging Institute (IBE-BVI) was established during the 1950s, when plastics was the fastest-growing, and possibly the most exciting, materials sector. Today, environmental concerns are arguably the most significant influence on packaging developments, with plastics the principle target for reduction or elimination.

One of the biggest challenges, according to institute director Marleen Calcoen, is encouraging the 'rational' use of packaging. This is partly about ensuring that product is neither 'overpackaged' nor 'underpackaged'. "But rational packaging is not only about using the right amount of material," she says. "It is also about the choice of material. Each material has its properties, and based on this, the best choice has to be made, depending on the product to be packaged and its destination. Plastics, for example, are materials with many good properties, and they deserve their place in the materials range."

She adds: "With the environment as a driving force, new developments in the packaging industry continue to occur: more readily-recyclable materials, renewable raw materials, the use of recycle, and so on."

But the pressure to eliminate packaging altogether, or even reduce it excessively, would be an example of 'irrational' behaviour, Calcoen points out. "A society without packaging is hardly conceivable," she states. "It clearly serves a purpose and performs multiple functions."

The IBE-BVI has just over 200 members. Companies are not required to become members in order to use the institute's services, but benefits of membership include discounts on training and lab testing, marketing, and so on.

Calcoen describes the customer base at IBE-BVI as being "very diverse". Members and customers include producers and distributors of packaging, but also end-users. In terms of size, companies using its testing and training services include everything from large multinationals to small businesses. "In general, we can say that around 60% of our customers are from the wider European market, or are even internationally located," she adds.

The various kinds of testing offered by the institute constitute its largest single area of activity. These tests span the range from materials and food-contact testing to child-resistance, dangerous goods and flexible intermediate bulk container (FIBC) testing. "Recently, we have seen increasing demand from industry for transport and climate simulation," says Calcoen. "They want to investigate what transport and climate conditions their packaging or palletised loads can withstand." In terms of transport testing, this usually involves drop tests, vibration tests and impact tests, alongside temperature and humidity tests.



The IBE-BVI's knowledge-transfer role is also important. This can take the form of articles, single-day educational events (such as a June 20th Bioplastics Seminar) or longer training courses. In October, for example, the institute is running a three-day English-language 'Deep dive into plastic packaging'. "Our training courses are the tool par excellence for answering industry needs for packaging knowledge," says Calcoen. "This can be either through open training or to a tailor-made, in-company formula."

Themes for training may include topics as diverse as materials knowledge, legislation and specific technologies such as printing.

The institute says it "focuses primarily on the daily questions and problems of the industry." Nonetheless, it also participates in packaging-related research projects. "We work together with other knowledge centres and universities," Calcoen reports. "Currently, we are participating in Optibarrier, a collective research project led by Pack4Food, in the work package investigating the barrier properties of materials."



Meanwhile, IBE-BVI Group also has its Testing & Consultancy Packaging International (T&CPI) subsidiary in Breda, the Netherlands, serving the Dutch market while relying on the testing facilities at the institute's Zellik headquarters in Belgium.

<http://ibebvi.be>