

You buy a large pack of pasta or rice, and you don't even know how much you're getting. You just eyeball it and get a small or large pack. And so the trick is to get back to the idea of price per weight. Nowadays with bulk shopping, it's all about asking yourself the real question: what do I really need?

Hello On The Way. My name's Célia Rennesson, and I co-founded and I run the Réseau Vrac et Réemploi organisation, and I'm delighted to be with you for this new episode. I studied economics for five years at the Paris-Dauphine University. After that, I started out at a strategy consulting firm, and I worked there for three years. Then I worked for six years at Clear Channel Outdoor, which is an outdoor advertising specialist, where I had two roles.

For the first three years I was attached to the management board and I worked on all the company's strategic plans. After that, I created my own position, as head of innovation. That was when we started to switch from paper billboards to digital screens, and while I was working on what you'd call entrepreneurship at Clear Channel I had my ecological awakening in 2012. I'd say that it was an awakening of something that had been dormant in me. Something really clicked for me. I was watching a TV show, about a French expatriate woman in the United States, who was living the American life, with all the big cars, and that sort of over-consumption, and then she had this moment when she realised that she existed more in her car than in reality, and she had this awakening.

So she looked at her lifestyle, her activities, and her consumption. And when she examined her consumption, she realised that she was consuming far too many things, and that that consumption produced a lot of waste. So she decided to try to reduce her needs to the bare essentials. And by reducing her needs, she ended up being able to fit all of her family's packaging waste for one year into a one-litre container. So she explained her whole process.

And that was the moment it really clicked for me. I decided two things: first, she was right, and that awakened certain things in me, things that my parents taught me, which I'll explain later. And second, I realised that obviously I'd always been careful to buy organic products, seasonal products, and so on, when I was shopping, but that I hadn't solved the problem of disposable packaging waste, and I think everyone thinks that when they go shopping, the first thing you do when you unpack it all is you fill up a bin with all the disposable packaging. And I think that deep down nobody's very happy with doing that. I started looking for everyday solutions in my shopping, so as to be able to shop like that woman. So that's called packaging-free shopping, buying products that are not sold packed. You can choose the quantity, you bring your own containers, and you get a bit closer to what our parents taught us. You don't waste, you don't throw things away, you finish everything. You turn off the tap when you're washing your hands. My father always told me to turn off lights. We used tea towels, cloth napkins, and so in fact in a way it took me back to my childhood, and it fulfilled a part of my lifestyle that I'd been missing, by making me look for those things again.

I'm lucky enough to live in Paris, so there are a lot of local shops, and a lot of organic stores. So I looked around at what was on offer nearby, and I realised that there weren't any solutions for bulk shopping. I couldn't buy detergent, shower gel, tomato sauce, or jam. So I could do some of my shopping, but not all of it.

And I thought to myself, if it's that tricky for me, then it's also going to be tricky for other people, it's not making things easier, it's not going to push consumers to change. And so the idea

is to transform our ways of consuming, but without it all being too painful, in order to facilitate that transition. And so, there and then, I decided that as there weren't any shops that sold everything in bulk, I'd create one.

And so for one and a half years I worked on a business plan and looked for product suppliers. I visited organic stores, I looked at labels and decided which suppliers to contact. And I also contacted major brands. I visited banks, and commercial premises.

I looked into what could be done in terms of legislation. Because the first question you need to ask is: are you allowed to sell jam in bulk? And then, for example, once you've bought a five-kilo container of jam, how do you manage it? What sort of information do you put on the labelling? How do you sell it to consumers? And meanwhile I still had my day-job, so I did all this in the evenings or on weekends, and over that time of that one and a half years, I rapidly came to the conclusion that it was complex. I realised that in fact the sector was in its infancy, it had been adopted by organic shops since the 1980s, but it wasn't well-developed, and there were a lot of elements missing from the market in order for it to develop, and that it was too complex for entrepreneurs who'd probably had the same idea as me to deal with it all on their own. And the more meetings I had, the more the idea developed of bringing together all these entrepreneurs and companies that wanted to transform themselves, and bring them all together within an organisation that would support them in their transformation, by providing them with all the tools, resources, support, and training, to help them move from selling individually packaged products, to packaging-free sales. And so that's what happened, as these meetings went on. In March 2016, I filed the articles of association for the Réseau Vrac, an association under Act 191, which brings together companies in the package-free retail sector, meaning producers, equipment solutions suppliers and stores. So that was in 2016, and since then a lot of things have developed, as today the name of our association is Réseau Vrac et Réemploi: the Bulk Sale and Packaging Reuse Network.

Today, the Réseau Vrac et Réemploi is a professional association, which brings together companies in the bulk and reusable packaging ecosystems. We've got just over 900 member companies, from producers to distributors, along with suppliers of washing centre equipment solutions. Our three main roles are: structuring the packaging-free market, helping it to develop, and promoting it. Within these three major roles, we have main activities geared towards structuring the sector: lobbying initiatives, to favourably alter the legislative framework, and getting the law or the reuse of bulk packaging to set objectives in order to push companies to transform their offerings. It's also about organising technical working groups, as the market is in the process of being set up so it needs to have standards and rules. For example, what are the standards for washing that need to be put in place in France? How should labels be designed so that they come off when washed? That's an example of the sorts of working groups we organise. For our second major role, that of market development, we carry out studies. We've just published the first economic survey of the sector, with Deloitte, as there were no current figures for quantifying this sector.

So we've done that. And by quantifying it, by providing studies that are both consumer-based as well as economics-based, it allows companies to understand what they're getting into, and where the market has to focus so as to have potential. And then, obviously, there's our development role, and our main tool for that is the Refill and Reuse Trade Fair. And our final role of promoting the sector, is all about talking to the media at conferences to raise awareness, educate, and inform different audiences.

When we established the association in 2016, the first thing I did was to find a lawyer to study the French Consumer Code, to try to understand, product by product, how those products are dealt with and whether or not we were allowed to sell them packaging-free. And we realised that there was a huge legal vacuum around packaging-free sales, and that the Consumer Code was written for packaged goods. So we were constantly trying to work out whether you're allowed to sell milk, frozen products, food supplements, honey, and so on without packaging. Either we'd get a very clear answer, which was no. Basically, you're not allowed to. That product has to be sold in a sealed package, and so it can't be sold packaging-free. Either that, or there was nothing, and so it was open to free legal interpretation. So what we started to do, little by little in 2016, according to the needs that companies were telling us about, was look at what the Consumer Code said, on a case-by-case basis, for every product when there was vagueness, and ask the authorities for an interpretation. And if ever that product was banned, not for health public health reasons, but rather because the Code hadn't in fact considered a packaging-free format, we'd try to get rid of such restrictions. Gradually we made progress, and one of the first things we succeeded with was olive oil. We realised that there was a crucial missing element: packaging-free sales didn't exist in the Consumer Code, and that if we wanted to make legislative progress to authorise as many products as possible, the first thing to do was to give it legal status. And so we used the AGECL law, the anti-waste law for the circular economy, which was being drafted at the time. And I'll always remember a senator coming to see us, who said "there's nothing about packaging-free sales in the AGECL law, it needs to be included. What are you calling for?" And that was when we realised that it was the perfect legislative vehicle to get what we needed.

And so, thanks to the AGECL law, we introduced a definition for packaging-free retail. Then, after we wrote up the definition, we also stated that all products must be able to be sold packaging-free, with exceptions for public health reasons, and that those excluded products would be detailed in a decree. And then we said: we need to give consumers the right to shop using their own containers.

That was really something new! Because what we didn't want was to penalise the retailers, who were afraid of selling their products this way and whose thinking was "If I accept a consumer's container, and it's dirty, isn't there a risk of them coming back to me and saying now I've got sick? And it's your fault!" But in fact, it was maybe the container that was dirty.

And that was a really new thing. You need to understand that in legislative terms, French law strongly protects consumers. It's never the consumer's fault, it's always the distributor's fault. And yet here, we've managed to make consumers responsible. So we said that consumers have the right to do their packaging-free shopping with their own containers, on condition that their containers are clearly clean, suitable for the products sold, and comply with the washing and hygiene rules as specified by the retailer. And that allows the practice to be regulated, and for consumers to be more responsible. So that was a major step forward. Also, within the AGECL law, we asked for the producers of products labelled PDO, PGI, such as Camargue rice, for example, to review all their specifications product by product, to allow for packaging-free sales, and if they didn't allow it, to explain and justify why not.

And so, for example, Camargue rice was studied, and they stated "yes, we authorise it, and here are our conditions". And so that's how we're moving the market forward little by little. So that, in February 2020, was a major step forward for our sector, and I think that France is the only country to have adopted a definition of packaging-free retail.

And then we went one step further in 2021, with the Climate and Resilience Law, which came out of the Citizens' Convention for the Climate, and where we, working with the authorities, set a target of 20% of sales for packaging-free products in stores over 400 square metres, pushing stores to sell more packing-free products, so that means packaging-free sections as well as deli sections, to motivate customers to bring their own containers to those sections. So promoting packing-free sales even further. Also, in that law, targets were set for the reuse of packaging. So what you might call in shorthand, returnable products, with returnable packaging, which is returned and washed. And there's a target of 10% of packaging being reused in all stores by 2027. So that's how you can move a sector forward and make a mark, and these advances at French level have also had an international impact, a European impact. Lots of countries have come to see us, and have said that they'd also like to have objectives like ours in their own laws, and transform their offerings.

And just recently, on the 26th of April, a European text was signed. So that was the revision of a packaging and packaging waste directive, which regulates the whole packaging sector at the European level, which was revised to be transformed into a regulation. That means that it will be imposed on the member states. So they won't have the choice of transposing them or not. It will be mandatory. This amended version of the text includes objectives for packaging-free and reuse, like in France. And that text was inspired by our progress in France. So at the same time, we're happy because we see that we're able to push things forward on the European level. But we're also a little less happy, as the objectives that were initially been set in the text that was drafted by the European Commission were much more ambitious, and have been somewhat diminished. So it's all about making it clear that while Europe is setting targets that are a little less ambitious than the ones we have in France, member states must be allowed to go further.

The position of our association has always been that if you want to transform consumption patterns, first of all you have to transform what's on offer. I always start from the basis that consumers buy what they see in front of them. So you have to transform what people see on shop shelves when they go shopping or order deliveries. And so that's why our main thing, our main activity, is first and foremost focused on businesses. It's all about providing them with the tools and resources they need to help them transform their businesses. To orient a business, you need figures, and the thing that was sorely lacking in our sector when we started out, was that we realised that no one was tracking packaging-free sales, so nobody knew how many stores had packaging-free sections, how many products were being sold, what turnover they made, how many customers they had, and so on: nobody was tracking it. And so that's also something we've done with the association.

The first thing we did was to form a partnership with Nielsen IQ, to try and quantify packaging-free consumers. So we wrote a questionnaire that Nielsen asks its panel twice a year, specifically to try and understand who's buying. Why? For what reason? What are the obstacles? And this survey panel has been evolved. So the first figures I can give you for the consumer side, are that, at the very beginning, before the Covid crisis, there were some 37% of packaging-free buyers in France, and that today they number 30%. So it's dropped seven points since 2019, due to the Covid crisis, which profoundly altered consumption patterns.

And it wasn't so much that French consumers don't like packaging-free goods anymore, but rather that they've had other priorities due to the various crises that they've experienced: the health crisis, and then inflation. And the fact that, worldwide, people haven't been talking about

ecology and zero waste as much as they were in 2019. So consumer habits have changed. Once you stop talking about something, it's harder to pick it up again. And in parallel with that, we also carry out internal surveys with our members. And I can tell you that, as of the end of 2023, we've started to see consumers coming back into stores again. So there's been increased in-store traffic and also increased average shopping baskets, i.e. consumer purchases. And what we're hoping for now is that if the external geopolitical situation stabilises, and then these customers will keep coming back. Because right now, environmental issues can't wait any longer. And I think people are aware of that. Also there are other advantages with packaging-free products and packaging reuse. And consumers are starting to become aware of these advantages, which allow people to save, both in terms of the environment as well as economically.

Packaging-free and reusing packaging is first of all seen as a solution for reducing disposable packaging waste, as packaging is reused multiple times. So, of course, when you do packaging-free shopping, or you buy a bottle that you bring back to the store, you're not generating more waste for your bin.

But in fact you find that there are also other advantages. And often you only notice them later on, once you've got started. In terms of packaging-free shopping, you can save money. Why?

Because packaging-free means being able to buy products that aren't packaged. It's up to the consumer to decide how much they buy.

I say, this because often people tell me "yes, but I don't know how much I need. So sometimes I buy too much, and I end up feeling like it's costing me more."

And that's true, you have to remember that over the last 60 years our responsibility in terms of being able to choose how much we need has been taken away. When you go to a shop, you buy a whole pack of biscuits. You don't even know how many you're getting, you're just buying a pack of biscuits. You buy a bag pack of pasta or rice, and you don't even know how much you're getting. You just do it by eye, and get a small or a large pack. And so the trick is to get back to the idea of price per weight. Nowadays with packaging-free shopping, it's all about asking yourself the real question: what do I really need? That's the reason why it's important that when you do your weekly shopping, you don't do it on the spur of the moment, but rather you make a list of products that you need, so you avoid making purchases you don't need and that make you spend more or buying quantities you getting the wrong quantity.

So the crucial question is, what do you really need? And then you need to really pay attention to prices per litre or per kilo, as that's where you can really compare prices and make savings. For example, let's take cashew nuts, something everyone knows about. Cashew nuts, when you buy them packaging-free, they tend to flow rather freely, and you might take more than you usually do. And then you get to the checkout and you go: "what? 8 euros! That's a lot! Normally when I buy cashews, a pack is two or three euros." But in fact, how many grams of cashew nuts did you buy when you bought a pack for two or three euros? So when you can compare the price per kilo, that's where consumers can really take back control of their consumption. And a good example that happened a while back, you might have heard of it, is shrinkflation. So when inflation hit, the prices of all products, of all raw materials went up. Some brands decided they couldn't increase the face value of their packs. So in order not to increase the face value of their packs, they reduced the quantity inside. But on the surface, it looked like the same price for a pack that looked the same. When in fact the price per kilo had gone up. Packaging-free shopping allows consumers to understand weights and prices when they buy, and so they save money because they only buy what they need, and avoid waste. Remember that consumers waste over

one hundred euros every year by buying too much and throwing spoiled food away. People throw away seven kilos of new, unopened food in the bin, because they've got tricked into buying too much. So these are savings that you can recover by buying packaging-free. And especially in these times of inflation, sometimes you tend to give up certain products, and so buying packaging-free allows you to not compromise on quality while still enjoying small treats. Maybe you buy things in smaller quantities, but at least you can still buy them.

So for me it's an "inflation remedy", and it's also a way of consuming that adapts to the size of households. These days we're moving more and more towards a society with households of one or two people. We've got an aging population, people often live alone, and seniors are now among the biggest buyers of packaging-free goods. There are also a lot of students, because they can adapt quantities to their needs, and they don't have to buy packs sold in pairs or in fours that don't suit them.

Packaging-free shopping first arrived in France in the 1980s, via organic shops, who wanted to popularise organic food. So they purchased very, very large quantities of products, that they then shared between stores. That way they could sell them more cheaply per kilo, and therefore make organic products more accessible. And so it's true that you might think "as a consumer, I feel like I've got less choice, when I buy packaging-free products, there's only organic food on offer".

There have been, and still are, supermarkets that have developed discount and low-price packaging-free sections. So in these stores there's also a different category of packaging-free products. Because really, major brands weren't interested in going packaging-free, not because they thought that their marketing would disappear, marketing doesn't disappear with packaging-free retail. They can still display their brand and its labelling on dispensers and scoop-containers. The biggest fear of brands is thinking that they might lose control over their products, and whether stores will manage them properly. And whether, when consumers buy them, their products will be of the same high quality as when they leave their factories, where they know that when they wrap their products in packages, that they'll remain intact. That was the biggest fear on the part of brands. And so between 2016 and 2020, we worked on creating training courses in best hygiene practices for packaging-free retail, which hadn't existed before, to train stores to set up frameworks, processes, and labelling rules, so that people can find all the product information, beyond the legal minimum. Because in fact the law provides very few details about the information that has to be displayed. So we decided that we needed to go further, because consumers are used to having a certain amount of information, they need to at least see the same information on dispensers and packaging-free retail equipment. Right now it's not in every store, but you can find this information in all the stores where it's being tested out, for major sweet brands, for major coffee brands, major pasta brands, major cereal brands, and so on.

And so that's also how we're bringing choice to consumers. Because I'm absolutely sure that if we want consumers to buy in packaging-free format, then they've got to be able to find all the products they usually buy. So there's a slightly more limited choice, because sometimes right now, I don't think you need 18 types of farfalle pasta, but consumers can at least have the choice of a branded organic farfalle pasta product, maybe a local product, and a premium price product. It's about having a choice, and finding your usual everyday products.

Still, there can be limits in terms of the technical aspects of products. Can you technically sell a certain product packaging-free? Might it crumble into pieces when you transport it? Will it go soft if I buy it in the store? And so product testing phases are often needed. That's what Michel & Augustin have been doing. They've studied their entire range of aperitif cakes, and after many

months of testing they excluded some of them, deciding that they don't pass the test for packaging-free sales, as the moisture retention rate was unacceptable. And the ones that are on sale in packaging-free format are the ones that have passed their tests, and so they can be sold directly packaging-free. So that's one solution. And the second solution is to work on special recipes for packaging-free sales. Because when you have packaging-free biscuits, for example in a scoop container where you serve yourself, when they're moved around it can break the biscuits. So you need to avoid biscuits that are easily broken. This is notably the case with the Défi Vrac coalition, which includes brands such as Bell, LeSieur, Famille Michaud and Danone, who are trying to find solutions for products that aren't yet available packaging-free, such as viscous and soft products, and they have turned to equipment manufacturers to work together on creating packaging-free systems for self-service purchases of these products. So that should be rolled out in stores by the end of the year.

And all that work is being done right now by a coalition of major brands. These are the so-called marketers and retail brands, and the operators in between. To manufacture these products, they need to agree on shared packaging standards and specifications, washing standards, labelling, standardised packaging, logistics flows for collecting empty packaging returned by consumers, and shared signage: how do you remind people in every store that this packaging is meant to be kept and not thrown away? There's a deposit system, so they have to be returned. And we're working with all these actors. And so whether it's about packaging-free, or reuse of packaging, the common thread is reinventing economic models, business models, and ways of working. And in my opinion, that's also the future.

You really have to bear in mind that a company is not going to change its business model just because it's the right thing to do. They're going to do it because it's an economic opportunity. And when there are emerging markets, which is the case for packaging-free and reuse, the transition aspect is very significant, and can take a long time.

And so this transition of economic models is a risk they're taking, it's an investment risk where companies can't go it alone. So, for example: if in the yogurt section, there's only Danone that sells its plain yogurt in returnable packaging, you'll think "that's great, Danone's making an effort, I'll buy it, and I'll bring back the container next time".

But if it's the only product in your entire shopping basket where you have to return the packaging, will you really do it? Maybe you'll do it once, or twice, but you won't do it all of the time. So that's where you realise that you have to get an entire market on board. And so to bring a whole market on board in the current economic climate, with shareholders who are sometimes foreign, with returns on investment that are required immediately, with geopolitical uncertainties, the only way to get everyone on board together at the same time, is to act via the law, because that obliges manufacturers to work on it, as they no longer have a choice. And we're here to support these actors, to get them to work on it, to orient them, and help them move towards a new economic model, one that's no longer based on single use, but rather on reuse.

So this whole system can't just be designed ad-hoc, it has to be designed together, and the actors have to agree on shared rules, and we're in the middle of doing exactly that. And I can tell you that it's complex: everyone wants to get there, but they don't all have the same interests. And so we're working on bringing the actors together, on keeping relations calm, and achieving something that allows us to work in the interests of everyone.

That's really what we're trying to do right now, and it's what's so exciting. And we're doing it for consumers. We want to roll out packaging-free products, and products sold in reusable packaging to all areas. We're not doing it for just one niche section of the country, but for all French people. We want to massively transform our patterns of consumption, reduce waste, reduce packaging waste, and also the pressure on our biodiversity. When I say that the reuse economy is about increasing the number of uses, it's important to that you keep everything you collect for as long as possible, before having to put it into recycling. And so for this to have a large-scale effect, these products have to be available everywhere: in small local shops, in hypermarkets, in supermarkets, in drive-throughs, and so on, and be suitable for all socio-professional categories, for all standards of living. So that's why we need offerings for all budgets, for all wallets, and available via all purchasing channels.

To motivate consumers, what's absolutely crucial, is that they understand what packaging-free products and reusable packaging are. And sometimes when we do consumer surveys, we realise that people aren't aware of them, or they don't see them. So that's why we've focused on developing the offering first of all. There absolutely have to be products in stores, otherwise people won't have a chance to buy them. And they have to see these products in stores. So for consumers to be able to see them, they have to be aware of them. And the best way of doing that, is to talk to people, to explain it to them, to educate them, and so that means awareness campaigns. That's what's really lacking. There's lots of advertising for packaged goods, but very little advertising for packaging-free products, and that's why, three years ago, we launched the Packaging-Free and Reuse Month initiative, in March. We thought: "Well there's Veganuary in January, there's No-Smoking Month, so we also need to have a special month, where we really showcase and talk about the topic even more than usual".

And so with the Packaging-Free and Reuse Month initiative, we created awareness campaigns that we circulated on social media networks throughout the month of March. We also produced communications kits for stores, and encouraged those stores to hold events at their points of sale, to communicate with their consumers via their newsletters and so on, to promote their packaging-free sections. And the feedback has been positive. We realised that in fact when you talk about it, when it's promoted, then consumers get it, and they'll do it over and over again. So I think that one of the keys for promoting the switch to packaging-free products and reuse, is to talk about it, to raise awareness, to explain, and to educate, and break down preconceived ideas that people might have about hygiene and practicality, to show that there are plenty of products, and above all so that everyone can find what they need.

This was also the approach we took when we wrote our book in September 2020, called "*Packaging-free: the how-to guide*". We realised that we needed to support consumers step by step in their switch to packaging-free, so we created a public website, [vracetreemploi.com](http://vracetreemploi.com), entirely dedicated to citizens and supporting them in their transition to packaging-free and reuse. There are quizzes, true and false sections, videos, and maps to help you find stores where you can buy packaging-free products, stores that have collection points where you can bring back empty packaging, and guide you step by step through the process, at your own pace. And I hope that it answers everybody's questions.

We have a lot of contradictions in our lives. We want to do things, but we don't actually do them. And then there are priorities that come from emergencies, and with all these things, with these



contradictions, it's difficult. Personally, I start from the basis that it's difficult to make changes to consumer habits, and based on that observation, every little gesture's important, and you absolutely mustn't get discouraged, or put things off until tomorrow, because you think: "ah yes, tomorrow I'll go packaging-free, but I need to get jars, I need to get organised..." And so my first point would be to say to people: no, don't wait: if you want to do something, then just do it! So maybe your first action could be like me: get rid of disposable paper towels, and use dishcloths and napkins. But do it at your own pace. Start with what you think is easiest. And once you've made a small change, it sticks, and then it becomes a habit. Then you can move onto the next thing.

That's really my philosophy in life: seeing these things in a positive way, as a game to play at your own pace, and definitely not as somehow punitive environmentalism, quite the opposite: it's about a playful environmentalism, and that's how you have to do it.

And that's how we see it, or at least how we see packaging-free and packaging reuse: as a game, as something fun. It's been over twelve years since I started on packaging-free and reuse, and now I don't even have to think about it. It's a habit.