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Why Companies Need to Take the Lead in the Plastic-Free Movement

Brands are not the only culprits in this crisis, but they are one of the most influential



Dozens of direct-to-consumer brands and retailers have been built solely around the issue of reducing single-use plastics. Designer/Getty Images



By Noemi Garcia

3 DAYS AGO

It's no secret that there's been an enormous cultural and consumer reckoning with our plastic usage. According to some estimates, roughly 8 million metric tons of plastic makes its way into the ocean every year, and by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in the water. Even in the face of these alarming statistics, the World Wildlife Fund predicts that the amount of plastic production is actually expected to grow 40% by 2030.

This imminent crisis has galvanized consumers, governments and companies alike around plastic-reducing measures and has catalyzed a radical plastic-free movement. This month is Plastic-Free July, a growing global campaign that challenges people to forgo single-use plastic during the month of July.

This is a daunting challenge when you consider how much single-use plastic the average person uses each day, which likely rose during the pandemic as disposable masks, plastic bags and delivery packaging proliferated.

Before you write this off as a niche movement relegated to the environmentalist corners of the world, consider that last July, during the height of the pandemic, more than 326 million people participated in Plastic-Free July across 177 countries. Last week alone, searches for "plastic-free" peaked at unprecedented levels, according to Google Trends.

But who actually bears the responsibility of reducing plastic waste: individuals, companies or governments? While there is no simple answer, Adweek recently partnered with Morning Consult to understand where consumers land on the issue.

The results were astounding. More than three-quarters of Americans hold companies primarily responsible for plastic waste, with 77% of respondents indicating that consumer-packaged goods (CPG) companies hold the primary responsibility of ensuring that their products and packaging are recyclable and do not contribute to pollution.

Not only are companies being held largely accountable for the problem, but according to consumers, they should be penalized for it. The survey found that six out of 10 respondents (59%) believe companies that fail to enforce recyclable packaging and minimize overall environmental impact should be financially or legally penalized.

So, while the plastics predicament is still fundamentally perceived as a shared responsibility, more consumers believe companies should take the lead. What implications do these findings have for the marketing community?

Sustainability is a mass issue

When you consider that 326 million people around the world participated in Plastic-Free July last year or that this year alone there were 6.8 million global social mentions of “sustainability” (up 29% from 2020), it is evident that sustainability has reached a critical mass. And while plastic reduction is only one of the core issues within the sustainability conversation, it is by far one of the most pressing. Dozens of direct-to-consumer brands and retailers have also been built solely around the issue of reducing single-use plastic.

A strong consumer driver—and a deterrent

Sustainable packaging and plastic waste reduction are growing drivers for consideration and purchase among all Americans, but most notably for millennials and Gen Z.

According to the [2021 State of Sustainability in America Consumer Trends and Insights Report](#), 65% of Gen Z and 63% of millennials are more likely to shop at a store if it provides options to refill their own containers with items such as hand soap, laundry detergent and food products to cut down on packaging and plastic waste. Inversely, perceived aggravation or contribution to the plastic waste problem is also deterring consumers from purchasing certain brands and products.

It goes beyond corporate social responsibility

Given the growing influence of sustainability in consumer decision-making, communicating your company’s commitment and actions to reduce plastic waste isn’t just the responsibility of the CSR department; it is a shared imperative with brand and marketing teams. Consumers are increasingly seeking to align their personal values with the brands they buy, and a company’s sustainable practices are a critical component of how a brand lives its values.

Key to sustainability marketing is simplicity

While the survey found that 75% of Americans feel confident they know how to recycle properly, that confidence level drops to 52% when respondents were asked about local recycling systems. This points to a glaring knowledge

gap and the need for simple and digestible resources to educate consumers. While companies should avoid placing sole responsibility on individuals, brands have an urgent imperative to help consumers understand how to properly dispose and recycle their packaging through simple guidance and resources.

While brands are certainly not the only culprits in the plastic catastrophe, they are one of the most influential. Companies are steadfastly looking to consumers for insight into how to best address this growing crisis, while consumers are looking to companies for swift and compelling action plans. It'll take vastly radical change from both to reduce our plastic, restore our planet and ensure a more sustainable future for all.



A SUSTAINABILITY PLAYBOOK ON THE DAY THE WORLD'S LARGEST ICEBERG WAS BORN



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