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Lessons learnt: Make sustainable living effortless – and systemic

Important as sustainability is for many consumers, it is often just one deciding factor among many. Which is why the way that we design and deliver our products has to make sustainable living as easy and enjoyable as possible.

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As a consumer goods company, consumers are at the heart of everything that we do. And we've been in this game long enough to know that they rarely stand still. Their choices and their habits are constantly adapting and evolving – and our success as a business has always depended on adapting and evolving with them.

In people's hands

While some of our environmental impacts relate to our own direct operations and those of our suppliers, a substantial impact occurs when our products leave the shelves and go home with our consumers – what we call the 'use phase'.

This is particularly evident in our targets on greenhouse gases (GHG) and water. Take our laundry detergents. Wash your clothes at 30°C rather than 60°C – as consumers can with our concentrated liquid brands like Persil, Surf and Seventh Generation – and the GHG emissions drop by as much as 50% per load. The same is true for shampoo and shower gels: colder and shorter showers lead to fewer emissions and, of course, less water.

Over recent years, demand for sustainable products and services has grown, albeit at an uneven pace across different markets. At Unilever, we have responded by launching a range of eco-efficient products. A recent new addition, for instance, is 'The Good Stuff', a stay-in hair conditioner that helps users save 460 litres of water per

bottle. Love Beauty and Planet, meanwhile, now offers a fast-rinse conditioner that cuts vital seconds off shower times.

In a few cases, we have seen product innovations like these really take off and become mainstream. When combined shampoos and conditioners first came on the market, for example, people were a little sceptical. Yet, today, the idea of a product that both cleans and conditions your hair (thus saving water and energy for heating) is very normal.

Even so, despite positive uptake in some categories, we underestimated how challenging it would be to help the majority of consumers change their behaviours to embrace more sustainable ways of living. Even where we have seen some success, we misjudged how long this transition would take.

Unilever Chief Sustainability Officer Rebecca Marmot explains the challenge: “The truth is that these innovations and others like them have not been enough to make significant progress on reducing the water and GHG impact of our products at the consumer use end.”



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Rebecca Marmot, Chief Sustainability Officer

Connecting with consumers

So why has progress been slower than we anticipated? Looking back, one key factor we underestimated was the level of incentive that we needed to provide.

Some consumers are passionate about the environment and will go the extra mile or pay that little bit more for an eco-product. The number of people who fit this description is growing year on year, which is very encouraging.

What's more, this group of eco-aware consumers has responded very positively to the sustainable solutions we have developed. TRESemmé and Dove, for example, have both seen strong sales for their no wash, dry shampoo ranges. The story is the same for the self-foaming hand and body washes launched by our Dove, Lux and Lifebuoy brands.

But there's a lot more potential here and we continue to innovate.

Away from the 'eco' end of the market, though, most consumers are – understandably – motivated by more immediate factors like price, convenience, and quality. And one of the barriers is the widespread assumption that doing the right thing by the environment means paying out more or settling for a sub-standard product.

At Unilever, we have always worked hard to make sure this isn't the case. Indeed, when products such as laundry detergents are reformulated to require less energy and water in use, they often work out cheaper for the consumer overall. When it comes to price, however, we realise most consumers still primarily consider what a product costs at the till rather than its cost over the lifetime of the pack.

Making connections like these with consumers has proved hard, says Henry King, Director Sustainability Science and Technology at Unilever. "We're up against very engrained behaviours here. People don't go into the shower thinking 'this is a climate changing event'. They just want to get clean."

If consumers see the issues at stake for themselves, then the story quickly changes. In cities where water shortages now represent a very real problem, consumers are more open to thinking about alternatives. In much of the world, however, climate change and water scarcity just haven't reached such alarming levels of visibility yet.

Building momentum

Trust is another major factor in behaviour change. With hindsight, we can see that the consistency of our communication could have been better.

If consumers feel like brands are giving a mixed message, such as the need (or not) to wash at high temperatures for maximum product performance, then a degree of confusion and hesitancy is "understandable", Henry adds.

In general, however, new behaviours just take more time to gain traction than we initially assumed. Change first requires the buy-in of a small group of trendsetters, then a larger group of early adopters, and only later, when consumers finally begin to see those in their immediate circle behaving differently, are most people ready to take the leap. What behavioural theorists refer to as 'herding'.

"Even when a brand has a large share in a market, generating this kind of momentum is very, very difficult. In competitive categories, like those our brands habitually operate in, the challenge is even greater," says Henry.

Over the years, we've learnt many lessons about making environmental behaviours easier and more attractive to consumers – all of which help inform our brands' ongoing efforts to 'nudge' people to use our products more sustainably. Our work continues.



Beyond individuals to changing whole systems

At the same time, we're also pushing forward with a parallel approach. Instead of trying to change one consumer at a time, we're asking ourselves if it is possible to change the overall system in which we all operate.

The core idea here is relatively straightforward. Take showering, says Thomas Lingard, Unilever's Global Sustainability Director, Climate and Environment. Just imagine if every shower ran on renewable electricity rather than on power from fossil fuel. Suddenly we decouple climate change from the enjoyment of long hot showers.

As ever, what sounds simple on paper turns out to be more complex in practice. The ability to shift entire systems onto a sustainable footing falls far outside the influence of any single company. Instead, it requires coordinated action by multiple organisations from across all sectors.

More than anyone, government has to lead the way here. For that reason, we are working hard to advocate for progressive policies that will transform the type of electricity that consumers receive and the way their water resources are managed.

We are seeing progress, especially around the adoption of renewable energy. But the pace is still too slow. To speed up this systems-level change, we plan to increase our advocacy efforts and our cross-sector collaborations in the future.

Mass behaviour change remains key to achieving our sustainability goals. Ideally, we want to remove the hassle factor for consumers. And we think the most effective way of achieving this is not through asking them to change, but to change the systems around them.

Lessons for the future

1. Be clear and consistent in why behaviour change is important and what changes we are asking consumers to make.
2. Demonstrate that sustainable living can be good for consumers as well as good for the planet.
3. Increase our work through cross-sector collaborations and advocacy to transform the systems in which our

products are used (eg water and energy)

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