



Sustainable Packaging Unwrapped

An in-depth study of consumer perceptions and behaviors surrounding sustainable packaging in the UK and U.S.



Contents

Introduction	03
Why now?	05
What Matters to Consumers	12
Never Waste a Crisis: the Opportunity for Brands	19
The Bottom Line	25
Methodology	28

Unless otherwise stated, the data in this report is taken from a bespoke survey from March 2019 among 1,589 internet users in the U.S., and 2,244 internet users in the UK aged 16-64



When David Attenborough issued a call to action to combat plastic waste in the second series of *Planet Earth II*, searches for “plastic recycling” saw a dramatic **uplift of 55%** in the UK. But the galvanizing impact of Attenborough’s words extended far beyond viewers of the show, and indeed the UK. Clutching at discarded plastic items retrieved from the ocean, his comments came after traumatic scenes showing the poisonous effects of plastic waste on marine wildlife. This was enough to set off what many have coined the *Attenborough effect*: a chain of events which have resulted in the so-called War on Plastic Waste and the wider social movement surrounding it.

Numerous environmental documentaries, **government initiatives, corporate pledges**, and **shocking stories** of plastic-induced wildlife tragedies later, and the War on Plastic Waste continues to reshape how companies must go to market.

The Attenborough Effect



There's nowhere for brands to hide now.

Sustainable packaging is no longer a nice-to-have. It's a must-have for any brands looking to future-proof their operations against the rising tide of consumer scrutiny.

In this report, we get to the bottom of consumer ambitions to embrace sustainable packaging; lifting the veil on how sustainable packaging factors into day-to-day purchasing decisions, the motivations behind choosing "greener" packaging, and what this means for brand positioning, brand communication strategies, and product packaging development.

01

SETTING THE SCENE

Why now?



The trend toward sustainable packaging, rooted in a larger environmentalist movement, has been gaining traction for quite some time. A number of factors have laid the groundwork for this. Both long-term efforts on a global political scale, as well as short-term catalysts like celebrity activism and viral images of environmental destruction, have all had their part to play in influencing consumer opinions in favor of sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY IN NUMBERS

 **43%** say they **do not take into consideration a product's packaging** before ordering online



72% say products that are **affordable are important** in their day-to-day shopping



53% say they have **reduced the amount of plastic** they use in the past 12 months

42% say products that use **recycled/sustainable materials are important** in their day-to-day shopping



28% say they **do not have sufficient information about which packaging** can be recycled from the products they buy

Growing consumer demand

It's not only a demand for sustainability that has grown, but also a willingness among consumers to put their money where their mouth is. At a global level, we've seen the number of consumers who say they would be willing to pay more for sustainable/eco-friendly products grow from 49% in 2011 to 57% in 2018.

And they're not just all talk – they're also taking action. In a recent bespoke survey among U.S. and UK internet users, we asked consumers if they've made any changes to their usage of single-use plastic in the past year. We found the steps taken have been largely positive, with the majority of consumers trying to cut down on their usage of disposable plastic.

WOULD YOU PAY MORE FOR ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS?

% of global internet users who say they would pay more for sustainable products

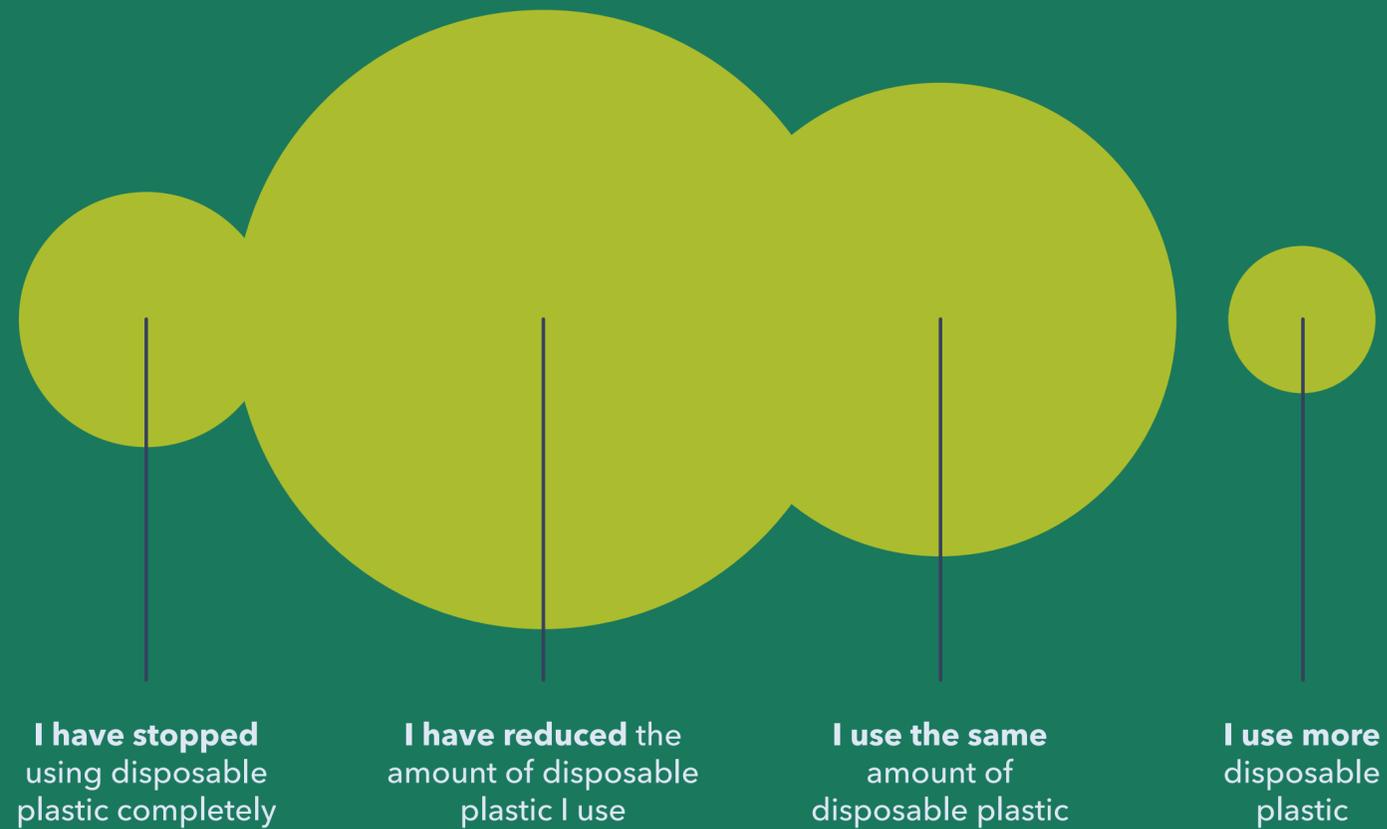


Question: To what extent do you either agree or strongly agree with the statement "I would pay more for sustainable / eco-friendly products" **Base:** 1,711,325 internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex 2011-2018 (averages of all waves conducted in each year)



CHANGING PLASTIC PACKAGING CONSUMPTION IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS

% who say they have done the following in the last 12 months



Question: When comparing today versus 12 months ago, which of the following apply to you and your use of single-use, or disposable, plastics... **Base:** 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

Over 50% of consumers said that they've reduced the amount of disposable plastic they use.



Increased global initiatives

1988

UNIPCC

The creation of the **UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** in the late 1980s signaled a new era of global efforts to reduce the destructive human impact on our environment. The now-195 member parties of the UNIPCC have met to discuss climate action for 23 Conferences of the Parties (COPs), have overseen breakthrough research on climate change's future impact on the planet, and have enacted multiple initiatives to reduce carbon emissions on a global scale.

1997

Kyoto Protocol

The establishment of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 set carbon-emission reduction targets for the member parties. Recognizing that developed countries have historically made a larger contribution to climate change due to industrialization, the agreement places a greater burden on these countries to cut back on emissions. The United States withdrew from this agreement in 2001.

2016

Paris Climate Agreement

The historic **Paris Climate Agreement**, garnered massive attention when it came into effect in 2016 and, through its ambitious targets, highlighted just how pressing the need to address climate change really is.

2017

United States' withdrawal

When the United States' **withdrew from the Agreement in 2017**, it sent shock waves through the world. Their withdrawal further heightened concerns about the future of the environment, as such a massive contributor to climate change had chosen indifference rather than action.

Environmentalism media and high-profile activism

News/media stories and documentaries are among the most influential sources impacting consumers' views on plastic waste and sustainability.

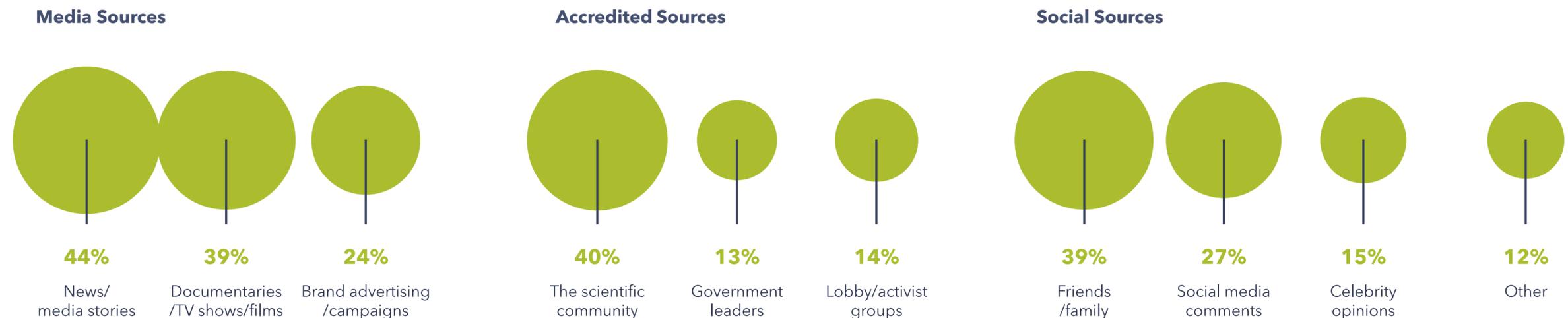
In addition to increased intergovernmental efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change, consumers have been targeted by a growing body of educational media and activism. The proliferation of high-profile environmental documentaries, such as *Before the Flood*, *Cowspiracy*, and - the one that started it all - *An Inconvenient Truth*, over the last number of years have broadened public awareness of the issue in ways that the scientific community alone never could. Celebrity activism around climate change has grown in tandem with this. *Before the Flood* featured one of the most vocal celebrity climate activists, Leonardo DiCaprio, as a key contributor. Other celebrities like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Gisele Bündchen and Sigourney Weaver have all been part of the

Years of Living Dangerously documentary and media project tackling climate issues.

Additionally, the spread of viral media showcasing the degradation of our environment has been both explosive and effective in furthering the movement. Notable examples include the award-winning photograph of a **seahorse** holding a cotton swab amidst a sea of plastic debris and, more recently, the news story of a whale that died after swallowing **88 pounds** of plastic bags. Perhaps the best example, however, is the video of a **marine biologist** removing a straw from the nose of a sea turtle. After going viral, this video affected the public consciousness so heavily that it helped catalyze the recent global movement to ban plastic straws.

Question: Which of the following information sources has the biggest impact in influencing your views on plastic waste, sustainability, etc.? **Base:** 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

MOST INFLUENTIAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON SUSTAINABILITY



Social media and the culture of accountability

The impact of a single video like the sea turtle and the plastic straw demonstrates how integral social media has been in helping spread this trend. Social media also plays a crucial role of holding public figures – be it corporations, celebrities, or politicians – accountable for their actions in a way that was previously not possible. In the past, a scandal like United Airlines' flight staff **dragging a passenger off of a plane** might have gone unnoticed. Now a single incident, recorded and shared millions of times over, has the potential to damage a brand significantly.

With this in mind, the time is ripe for brands to respond to growing consumer demands for environmental sustainability in a genuine and impactful way. Because the consequences of the alternative – being exposed for environmentally damaging business practices – can be dire. Reduced packaging, innovative design, and using recyclable materials – the list of potential solutions goes on and on. In the next section of this report, we delve into the possibilities further and examine what consumers really value when looking toward brands to practice sustainability.

In the age of social media, brands are being held accountable in ways not possible before.

02

ASK THE AUDIENCE:

What Matters to Consumers

It's clear that even though sustainable materials are important, the cost is the biggest challenger by far.



Sustainable packaging is important, to a point

With plastic waste increasingly under the microscope, consumers are re-examining their buying behavior and consumption of single-use plastics. But in the grand scheme of things, just how important are sustainable materials to consumers?

In our research, **we discovered that 42% of U.S. and UK consumers say products that use sustainable materials are important** when it comes to their day-to-day purchases.

Our data also reveals that fair-trade products and natural/

organic ingredients are two of the least important factors for consumers. A few years ago, we would have likely seen a very different picture when organic and fair trade were two words flooding the industry. According to Google Trends, **fair trade** as a topic reached a peak at the end of 2005 and at the end of 2007, but has been slowly declining since then. This shows that trends have a life cycle to some degree and have varying levels of importance too. One of the reasons plastic is under the spotlight is because its detrimental effects are so visible and widespread.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS FOR CONSUMERS

% who say the following are important when it comes to their day-to-day purchases

Question: When it comes to your day-to-day purchases (e.g. groceries, household products, personal hygiene products etc.), which of the following are important to you?
Base: 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

72%

Products that are affordable

52%

Well known/trusted brand

42%

Products that use recycled/sustainable materials

35%

Products made with natural/organic ingredients

27%

Products that are certified fair trade

41%

Products that are cruelty-free

25%

Premium-branded products

Price and brand trust are the most important considerations for consumers above all else. And there's an obvious conflict when it comes to consumers' desire to use sustainable materials versus what they're willing to spend or what they're able to afford. This tension between sustainability and affordability really comes to light when we look at the data by age.

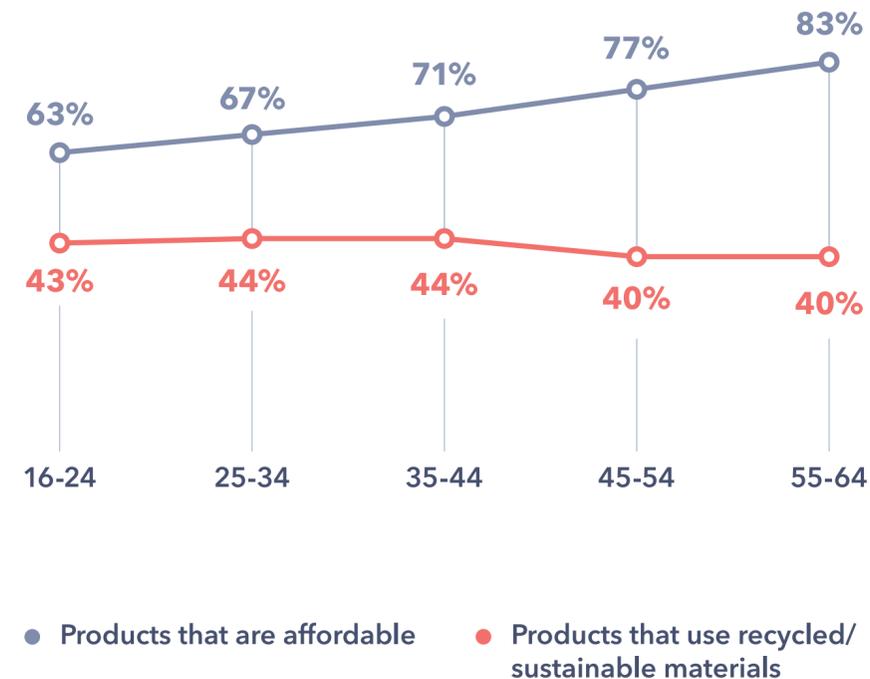
As consumers get older, the gap between affordability and sustainability increases. For example, **affordability is more important for consumers aged 55-64 than it is for consumers aged 16-24.** In fact, there's a 20 percentage-point difference between the age groups when it comes to affordable products. Clearly, sustainable materials are more of a consideration for younger consumers. This might partly be because younger generations grew up during the height of the sustainability crisis and are generally considered to be more eco-conscious than their older counterparts.

Younger audiences are also more engaged with social media and more easily influenced by other people's opinions; our data shows that 4 in 10 Gen Zers say they are easily swayed by other people's opinion. Their increased exposure to social media and impressionability has magnified the plastics revolution. Additionally, there are likely several other factors at play here, such as levels of disposable income and family situation.

Consumers are price-conscious primarily, and this presents a significant challenge for manufacturers and brands to overcome. Environmentally-friendly alternatives tend to have a higher cost attached to them, so unless there's a way to avoid passing these extra costs on to the consumer, brands may face an uphill battle getting consumers on board, at least in the short term. Even if consumers have the best intentions – price remains an issue. The difficulty will not just be finding suitable alternatives to plastic, but at a price point that will appeal to consumers.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN AFFORDABILITY AND ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS

% who say the following are important when it comes to their day-to-day purchases



Question: When it comes to your day-to-day purchases (e.g. groceries, household products, personal hygiene products etc.), which of the following are important to you? **Base:** 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

Why do consumers care about eco-packaging?

Over five decades ago, plastic was hailed as a revolutionary material: cheap, durable, lightweight, and used for practically everything.

Nowadays, the sentiment has dramatically shifted, and the threat that plastic has on the **environment** and wildlife is staggering. At the end of 2018, the Royal Statistical Society in Britain announced their stat of the year: **90.5% - the proportion of plastic waste that has never been recycled; a sobering thought.**

There's a wealth of discussion surrounding sustainability and plastic, and what we should or shouldn't be doing. It's easy to see why it might be possible to get swept away by societal expectations, and not what consumers genuinely believe or want. We decided to get to the bottom of this matter and uncover why consumers care about eco-packaging.

From our data, we can see consumers support sustainable packaging for fairly sincere reasons. They're not necessarily doing it to be a part of a global movement or because it's expected of them.

In both the UK and U.S., care for the environment is the primary driver behind choosing sustainable packaging.

Beyond a general concern for the environment, in the UK, motivations for buying sustainable packaging are more self-directed; focused on reducing waste for personal reasons. In the U.S., motivations are more public-minded, with consumers more willing to actively support companies or to set a positive example to friends and family.

73% of U.S. consumers who care about sustainable packaging say it's important to them because they're concerned about the future of the environment.

MOTIVATIONS BEHIND CHOOSING "GREENER" PACKAGING

% who say sustainable packaging is important for the following reasons

U.S.



Question: Why is sustainable packaging important to you in your day-to-day purchases?
Base: 654 U.S. internet users aged 16-64 who say sustainable materials are important **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

UK



Question: Why is sustainable packaging important to you in your day-to-day purchases?
Base: 1,000 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 who say sustainable materials are important **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

Brand loyalty is put to the test

Consumers are paying more attention to all aspects of the supply chain; from production, delivery, through to disposal. They're actively learning, becoming more aware of environmental issues, and aren't afraid to question a brand's sustainability claims or the role brands have. They're there with a watchful eye and this is something brands need to carefully consider.

We've discovered that when sustainability enters the equation, it's putting brand loyalty under immense strain.

This should be a wake-up call for manufacturers and brands. Sustainability isn't just another buzzword. Consumers genuinely care, and they're expecting more from brands than ever before.

There is a long way to go and sizeable challenges to overcome, such as the availability of alternative materials and price. But brands need to continue working hard on incorporating sustainability into their DNA and being open and honest with consumers along the way. It's no longer an afterthought, but a must.

% who say they agree or disagree with the following statement

“If I realize that a brand/product I use isn't environmentally friendly, I'm likely to switch to a brand that is”



- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

61% of consumers say they're likely to switch to a brand that is more environmentally friendly than their current brand.

03



INDUSTRY FOCUS

Never Waste a Crisis: the Opportunity for Brands

Taking the Pledge

Consumers are putting more scrutiny on brands and their products than ever. They're looking beyond just the product on the shelf into all parts of the production chain, helped by the virality of campaigns and messages on social media. **Consumer mindsets are guided mostly by media sources and peer groups**, though 1 in 4 internet users say brand messaging has the biggest impact in guiding their views on sustainability. But for the most part, brands aren't setting the agenda. The movement against plastic is coming from elsewhere, and brands will have to respond as the pressure builds.

Most brands have responded by pledging to clean up their act in the next decade. One of the most popular targets is the **pledge** laid down by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which compels brands to have 100% recyclable, reusable, or compostable packaging by 2025. Let's imagine a brand aiming for that commitment. The goal may be clear, but there are many paths that could be taken to reach it. So how could that brand meet the standards expected of them, and connect with sustainability-driven consumers, all while adding a positive brand value?



WHAT CONSUMERS WANT FROM ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PACKAGING

% who say the following types of packaging are important to them



Finding the path to sustainability

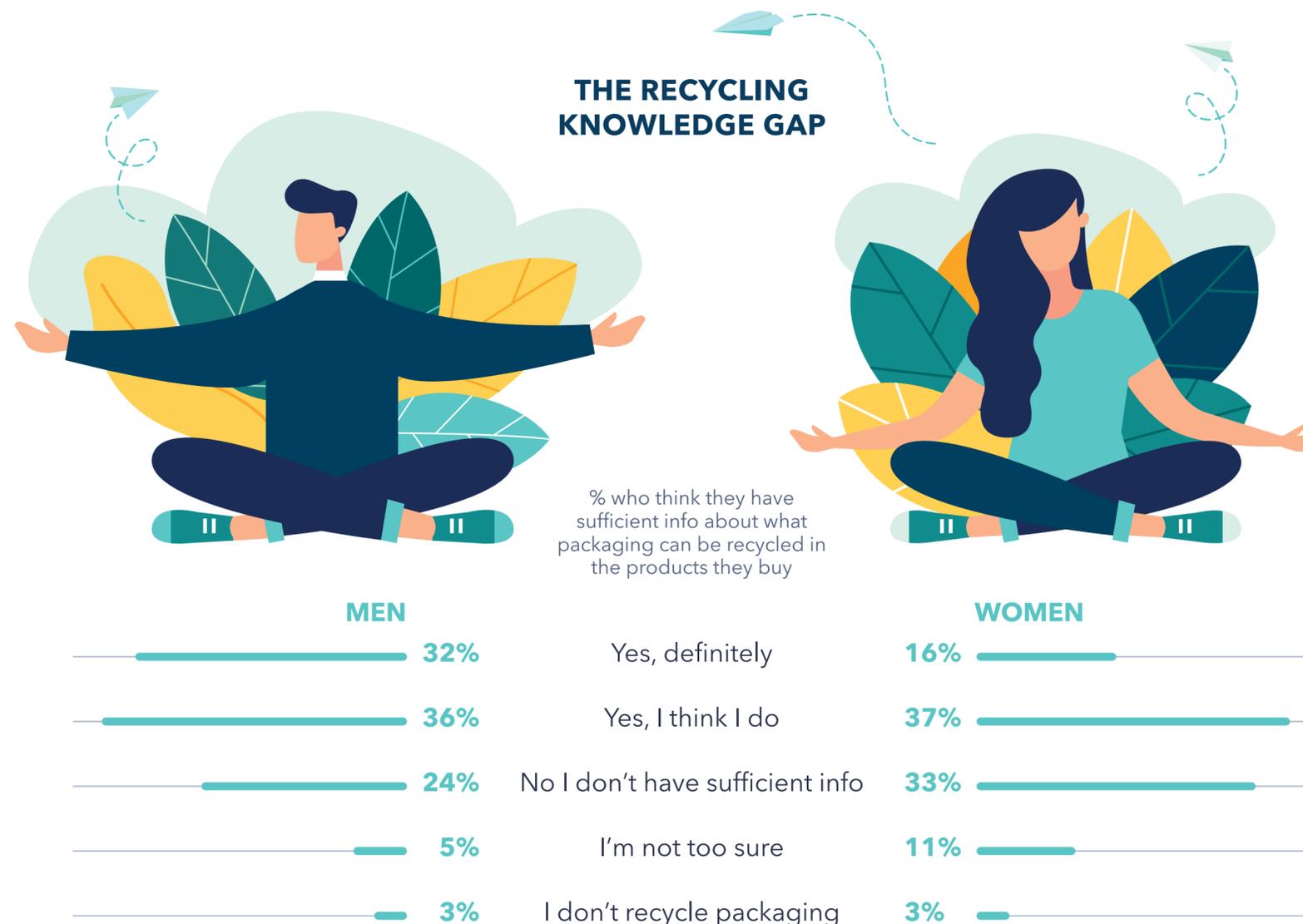
To get insight into this, we asked what specific factors about sustainable packaging were most important to consumers.

Of these factors, we found that **consumers identified recyclability as the most important to them.** Even as more pioneering packaging moves from the lab onto the production line, consumers respond strongest to a more old-fashioned solution. It's a similar story when we look at packaging full stop - consumers are more interested in recyclability than anything else - more than even its design or ease-of-use.

Question: When it comes to packaging that is environmentally friendly, which of the following factors are important to you?
Base: 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

2 in 3 consumers think brands that make a public promise to be sustainable are more trustworthy

Thinking about that roadmap to 2025, and the pledge to make packaging “recyclable, reusable, or compostable” in that timeframe, it’s the first of the three that resonates most with consumers. This may be because the hard work of educating consumers has been helped by years of government campaigns, but there are still many consumers who feel there isn’t sufficient information about recycling on the packaging of their products. 3 in 10 consumers don’t feel they have enough information about what packaging can be recycled, and of those, 41% say it’s because brand campaigns don’t give them enough information. There’s an interesting split by gender, as men are much more likely to say they have enough information about what packaging can be recycled. **This knowledge gap about what can be properly recycled is a great chance to pair education with strong brand messaging**, particularly among women, who tend to feel less confident that they have enough information.



Question: Do you feel you have sufficient information about which packaging can be recycled from the products you buy?
Base: 1,589 (U.S) and 2,244 (UK) internet users aged 16-64 **Source:** GlobalWebIndex March 2019

Don't let an opportunity go to waste

As Aedamar Howlett, marketing director for Coca-Cola has **pointed out**, using sustainable packaging and encouraging recycling goes beyond just inspiring a purchase, or following standards of corporate responsibility. Disposing of a product isn't something you see in most diagrams or descriptions of the purchase journey (when have you ever heard someone talk about "the disposal stage"?), but it offers a great opportunity for creating a shared experience with a consumer. Those brands that are transparent and informative about how to recycle their products, and innovative in doing so, are well-placed to benefit.

Some new packaging solutions are designed to remove all responsibility from the end user. Jem Materials **launched** a new form of completely biodegradable packaging in February 2019 that does precisely this. It may be the case that in the future, this becomes the only kind of fully sustainable solution for packaging that can match demand for fast-moving consumer goods.



But for the time being, with price concerns biting on packaging manufacturers, **a recycling-friendly approach can bolster marketing messages by empowering consumers.** Perhaps consumers actually *want* some kind of responsibility. They don't necessarily want to have all the work done for them; they want some investment in the process. Recycling can let consumers feel they've taken an active role in protecting the planet. This means providing packaging that's not just recyclable, but transparent about how to do so.

Recycling isn't the only solution that consumers respond to, though. Consumers identify it as the most important packaging feature in both the UK and U.S., but there are differences worth considering. The reuse trend has more of a foothold in the U.S., with more consumers saying they want packaging they can use for something else after. Compostable/biodegradable packaging is more important to them as well. Consumers in the U.S. may respond better to those sorts of innovative packaging solutions, while in the UK, consumers prefer an absence of packaging, and if it is there, for it to be recyclable above all.

TREND IN ACTION

The Crisp Packet Recycling Scheme



PARTICIPATING LOCATIONS

9,200

WASTE RECYCLED

1,299,104

Recent brand partnerships with innovative waste management company TerraCycle show how these consumer insights can be tackled in practice. A new scheme called **Loop** brings the milkman approach to a range of consumer goods, whereby products like shampoo and ice cream are left at a consumer's door to be used and refilled. In the UK, TerraCycle's **tie-up** with snacks brand Walkers saw them rollout a network of recycling bins across the country, in response to a campaign criticizing the brand for using plastic packaging. Walkers' strategy is a useful case study for showing how the media sets an agenda brands have to respond to, but how brands can in turn respond by pairing marketing with corporate responsibility.

04

The Bottom Line



No matter how determined they are to “do their bit” and ditch plastic packaging, their ambitions go only as far as their budgets and what’s laid out in front of them.

Too big to fail

If consumer buying decisions are constrained by the options on the shelf before them, then despite the growing industry interest in sustainable packaging, the options are still currently weighted against them.

In any normal scenario, this would seriously stifle the growth potential of such a movement. But such is the growing global social stigma against any company which disregards this war on plastic packaging, that consumer-facing industries have no choice but to act. If they don't, they risk being highly-exposed to consumer opinion and news media campaigns which are quick to rally against any guilty parties, potentially ruining brand reputations.

It's helpful to consider here a forerunner to the war on plastic packaging - the Montreal Protocol in the late 1980s, which aimed to phase out the production of substances harmful to the ozone layer under an international treaty. In the wake of this global agreement, a coordinated effort from governments, NGOs, industries and consumer behaviors collectively resulted in chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) being phased out of production.

The parallels between then and now are clear. But the speed and momentum with which social movements take root are much more rapid thanks to social media. As a result, **the driving force behind making this movement global now comes at the grassroots from consumers themselves**, not just transnational organizations like the United Nations.

A new playing field

This has meant that unlike with the Montreal Protocol three decades ago, the velocity of the anti-plastic movement has caught brands off-guard, and the pressure is stemming directly from the people who are putting money in their pockets - the consumers.

With brand loyalty in the firing line, and industry bottom lines in jeopardy, the incentives for companies to fall into line are mounting by the day. Transparency and accountability are both terms which get thrown around. But with the GDPR, privacy scandals and environmental shaming throwing brands onto the backfoot, **companies are now having to operate in a new environment which is increasingly empowering the voice of the consumer**, so they need to begin taking these terms seriously.

This means taking action against plastic packaging, and not just

making gestures. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation pledge provides brands with an important vehicle to work towards this goal, but why not take some competitive advantage and implement this into a creative marketing strategy?

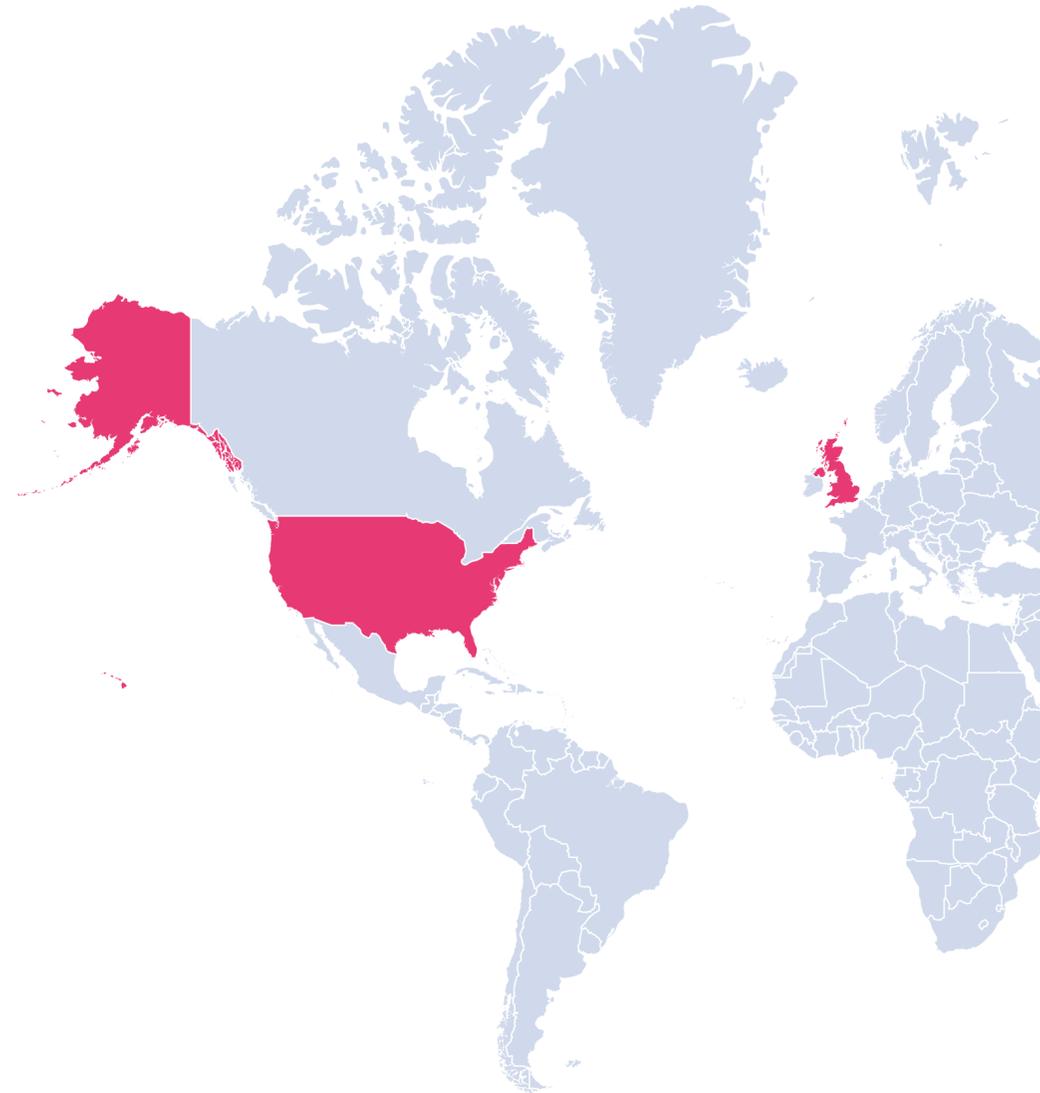
Tackling the issue of affordability in sustainable packaging initiatives is the key to unlocking consumer adoption at scale, but brands that simply focus on the recyclability issue - not discounting the importance of this issue - are missing an opportunity. That opportunity entails engaging the consumer. This means letting them play an active part in moving towards a sustainable future, and educating them at the same time. Innovative packaging solutions which target this desire to be part of something bigger could help to increase the demand for sustainable packaging solutions, and set new standards for utility and design in packaging.

This kind of thinking will separate the brands which choose to ride the anti-plastic current, and the brands which excel through innovation.

Methodology

Unless otherwise stated, the data in this report is taken from a bespoke survey from March 2019 among 1,589 internet users in the U.S., and 2,244 internet users in the UK. Please note, where clearly stated, this report also draws insights from GlobalWebIndex's ongoing global Core research.

For an in-depth explanation of GlobalWebIndex's research and methodology, including information on our country coverage, internet penetration rates, our sample structures, and much more, please [click here](#).



Our Research

As part of our ongoing global research, each year GlobalWebIndex interviews over 550,000 internet users aged 16-64 across 45 markets. Respondents complete an online questionnaire that asks them a wide range of questions about their lives, lifestyles and digital behaviors. We source these respondents in partnership with a number of industry-leading panel providers. Each respondent who takes a GlobalWebIndex survey is assigned a unique and persistent identifier regardless of the site/panel to which they belong and no respondent can participate in our survey more than once a year (with the exception of internet users in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where respondents are allowed to complete the survey at 6-month intervals).

Our Quotas

To ensure that our research is reflective of the online population in each market, we set appropriate quotas on age, gender and education – meaning that we interview representative numbers of men vs women, of 16-24s, 25-34s, 35-44s, 45-54s and 55-64s, and of people with secondary vs tertiary education.

To do this, we conduct research across a range of international and national sources, including the World Bank, the ITU, the International Labour Organization, the CIA Factbook, Eurostat, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics as well as a range of national statistics sources, government departments and other credible and robust third-party sources.

This research is also used to calculate the “weight” of each respondent; that is, approximately how many people (of the same gender, age and educational attainment) are represented by their responses.



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