



The Behavioral Science Behind Environmentally Friendly Refills

How a Cambodian enterprise could tackle single-use plastic reliance in the cleaning industry.



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Executive Summary

Reducing the use of single-use plastics is important in Cambodia due to both their negative impacts on the environment, wildlife, and resources, as well as the lack of effective waste management infrastructure. While past efforts to reduce plastic use have focused on food and packaging sectors, plastic waste in the cleaning sector has largely been ignored. Refillable cleaning products, particularly in commercial settings, offer a significant and largely untapped opportunity to reduce plastic waste through the use of more sustainable alternatives. Additionally, the regular use of cleaning products makes it easier to track and measure the impact of using refillable options on a business's sustainability efforts. In line with the above, this project explored private sector attitudes towards shifting to refill models for corporate cleaning supplies in Cambodia, all while focusing on the use of impact trackers to leverage plastics data as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Corporate Social Governance (CSG) strategies. To do so, we interviewed 15 business owners/operations managers looking at their organizations':

- Current sustainability attitude (from a policy and personal perspective)
- Current purchasing practices (i.e., having cleaning services inhouse or via cleaning companies)
- Attitudes to refill product models (from a purchasing and impact perspective)
- Perceived incentives and barriers to shifting to refill models
- The value of accessing plastic-use data to promote company impact
- Feedback on the current impact tracking interface
- Barriers to using technology for ordering refill products and for tracking impact

Businesses ranged from cafes and restaurants to consulting firms and property management agencies, each with their own perspective on the cleaning products they use, how they might switch to refills, and the perceived role of the private sector when it comes to sustainability in Cambodia.

Overall, it appears that, from a corporate social responsibility perspective, the perception is that Cambodian customers are **not yet sufficiently environmentally conscious** to encourage companies to adopt more sustainable practices through their purchasing decisions. Business owners feel that a change is coming, but even then, those who are concerned about environmental issues are likely to focus on issues such as reducing plastic packaging and single-use utensils, rather than the cleaning products used by companies. Put simply, incentives for private businesses to reduce plastics via cleaning product refills would be/are mainly intrinsic (i.e., employees or owners personally care about plastic or it is important for their specific brand/image), not because of external forces and incentives pushing them towards sustainability.

Because of this, an impact tracker that only tracks plastic waste generated by cleaning products may not be effective in changing customer behavior in a way that would drive then corporate behavior – at least without a broader cultural shift towards environmentalism. The tracker may have more influence in changing the attitudes of management and employees within companies towards sustainability, particularly if it helps them clearly and promptly visualize their environmental impact. **Expanding the tracker to track all plastic use within a company**, rather than just cleaning products, may also encourage companies to see reducing plastic use through cleaning products as a cost-effective and “easy” way to make a positive impact.

As it stands, the most effective use of the tracker is for businesses that are already committed to sustainability, either for marketing purposes or because of the nature of their business, to incorporate plastic reduction reports into their ongoing branding efforts. The impact of a business' action on plastic waste should be easy to understand and presented in a way that makes it feel worthwhile (both for employees and for customers). If this is not the case, businesses may not see the value of using refills beyond a (potential) cost decrease.

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A Global Partnership

The project to tackle plastic pollution in Southeast Asia was made possible by the ICM Falk Foundation's Circular Innovation Grant, which funds organizations to build behavior-based, upstream innovation solutions to curb waste at the source. The project was a collaboration between Mekong Inclusive Ventures (MIV) and Rare's Center for Behavior & the Environment (BE.Center).

- MIV is a majority Khmer- and women-owned impact venture firm that builds an inclusive impact finance ecosystem in Cambodia. It designs impact venture training programs and leads the adaptive capital movement in Cambodia. MIV's own venture development focuses on creating livelihood opportunities for people with disabilities and marginalized communities through innovative and inclusive business models.

MIV is leading the adaptive capital movement in Cambodia, recently founding the Phnom Penh Zebras Chapter as part of the global Zebras Unite community to generate an ethical and inclusive capital movement and community. MIV is also behind Bodhi Tree Naturals, the products of which this project focuses on, a company aiming to reduce single-use plastics in the cleaning industry while also creating new income opportunities in the community.

- Rare is an international non-profit organization specializing in social change for people and the planet. For nearly 50 years, Rare has partnered with individuals, communities, and local leaders on the frontlines of conservation to promote the adoption of sustainable practices. The organization has empowered over 10 million individuals, through more than 450 behavior change campaigns, to shift their behaviors and practices to protect the shared planet.

Within Rare, the BE.Center harnesses the science of human behavior to inspire this change. As conservation's first center to explore the intersection of behavioral science and design for conservation, the BE.Center transforms how the environmental field tackles our global challenges.



Background

The issue of plastic pollution is a growing concern globally, with plastic waste clogging our oceans and waterways and harming both marine life and human health. In Cambodia, the rapid increase in single-use plastic products is contributing to the country's waste problem. Additionally, a lack of proper waste management infrastructure has led to plastic waste accumulating in streets, rivers, and on the shores of Cambodia's beaches. Plastic pollution not only impacts the natural beauty and biodiversity of the country, but also poses a threat to the health and well-being of its citizens.

Plastic waste can release chemicals and contaminants into the soil and water, which can then be ingested by animals and ultimately enter the human food chain. Additionally, plastic waste can entangle and suffocate marine life, leading to the death of many animals over the hundreds of years it takes for most plastics to break down. While biodegradable materials are becoming more widely available and some industries are returning to traditional materials, such as using banana leaves as takeaway containers in the food industry, simple solutions like reusing or refilling plastic products can also make a significant impact in reducing plastic use and combating the problem of plastic pollution.

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The Case of MIV's Swap-N-Go Refill Model

To date, efforts to reduce single-use plastics in Cambodia have mostly focused on consumer or “end-user” behaviors. Corporate action typically only addresses employees’ personal plastic use at work rather than operational plastic use within a company. This part of the problem is too often glossed over, yet it is also a blind spot ripe with opportunity. Many businesses rely heavily on single-use plastic products in their operations (e.g. equipment orders, shipping, or cleaning). These products are used once and then discarded, contributing to the growing problem of plastic waste. Cleaning products are one area of corporate operations that can be targeted to reduce plastic use. Refillable cleaning product containers, already available for individual consumers, are a more sustainable option that can save money for businesses and reduce the carbon footprint associated with transporting new products. However, these products – until now – have not yet met the specific needs of businesses.

Refillable cleaning products for the corporate sector

MIV developed a refill-based model for hand sanitizers during the COVID-19 outbreak in Cambodia to provide low-impact income opportunities and employment for women entrepreneurs with disabilities. When the outbreak receded, and with a desire to increase its product range, MIV approached its key supplier to develop a joint venture that would both create employment and reduce single-use plastic waste. The agreement led to the creation of Bodhi Tree Naturals, which delivers environmentally-friendly, refillable cleaning products via a ‘swap and go’ model. Six years ago, the founders of MIV conducted a trial and gathered feedback on the possibility of creating a line of eco-friendly personal care items, such as shampoo, conditioner, and laundry detergent, that would decrease the use of single-use plastic products. However, the local market and consumers were not receptive to the quality of these products, which had less scent and fewer foaming agents than what buyers are used to. Consumers believed that a high-quality product had to have a strong scent and abundant foaming agents, and because no products that met these criteria without using significant chemicals existed, the project was put on hold... Until now.



Leveraging behavioral insights

Supported by the ICM Falk Foundation’s Circular Innovation Grant, Rare’s BE.Center partnered with MIV to bring a behavioral science lens to the problem of corporate refill buy-in, and to help ideate effective behavioral interventions to aid in reducing corporate plastic use. Rare’s BE.Center, would work with MIV to ensure its strategy was behavior-based.

The project was divided into four phases:



1. Rare’s BE.Center would assist MIV in creating a survey to gather information on attitudes and motivations towards a refill-based model for corporate purchasing of office cleaning supplies. The project was divided into four phases:



3. The BE.Center would analyze the interview results and provide behavioral science-based insights and recommendations.



2. MIV would conduct up to 15 interviews with a mix of small and large businesses to gather data on strategies for promoting refill models, with a focus on the value of technology for tracking impact and incentivization.



4. The BE.Center would work with MIV to refine a technology-based plastic-use tracker tool to incentivize the shift towards refill-based cleaning products.

Starting in August 2022, the BE.Center team leveraged its behavior-centered approach to develop a qualitative interview instrument. This interview guide allowed MIV to get to the core of private sector cleaning needs, assess their attitudes towards sustainability, and identify any barriers to shifting existing purchasing practices to a refill-based model. From November 2022 to December 2022, MIV used the instrument to conduct in-person interviews with small and medium-sized businesses in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Recordings of the interviews were collated and sent back to the Rare team for analysis in early January 2023. The BE.Center team gathered insights and provided recommendations on the internal and external motivations for reducing plastic use in Cambodia’s private sector, and about whether explicit waste reduction records (i.e., a plastic-use tracker) would be of value for businesses making the shift away from single-use plastic.

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Results and Takeaways

The purpose of this research was to identify strategies that could be used to persuade both small businesses and medium-sized corporate organizations to move away from single-use cleaning products and towards refillable ones. To do this, the BE.Center and MIV gathered business owners' and operations managers' perspectives on the reasons for choosing a particular cleaning product, perceived obstacles to refilling, as well as businesses' attitudes toward tracking their waste and the environmental impact of their day-to-day actions. Specifically, the BE.Center created an interview guide that explored organizations':

- Current sustainability attitude (from a policy and personal perspective)
- Current purchasing practices (i.e., having cleaning services inhouse or via cleaning companies)
- Attitudes to refill product models (from a purchasing and impact perspective)
- Perceived incentives and barriers to shifting to refill models
- The value of accessing plastic-use data to promote company impact
- Feedback on the current impact tracking interface
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Methodology

Following the project's launch, the BE.Center team interviewed several key informants to understand the drivers of refill behaviors and get a better sense of the reasons behind plastic use and eco-friendly behaviors in Cambodia. Complementing these insights with a review of published literature on the subject, the team then crafted a branching, semi-structured interview instrument that MIV would use to interview business owners and operations managers in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

MIV conducted 15 sets of interviews with small-to-medium-sized businesses from November 2022 to January 2023. Business types ranged from small cafes and coffee roasters to hotels and guest houses, as well as including NGO implementation partners and consulting firms – all selected to provide the broadest, yet most relevant “client” perspectives for the refill model. One of them was located in Siem Reap, the 14 others were in the capital, Phnom Penh. Over five hours of interviews were collated and transcribed before being qualitatively analyzed by Rare's BE.Center team.

Overall, six of the 15 businesses interviewed considered themselves “small,” and nine considered themselves medium-sized. These included two cafes (chains), a coffee roaster, two restaurants, two distilleries, two guest houses, a second-hand clothing store, a property management agency, an engineering consulting firm, an NGO, and a language school that also acted as a property manager subletting their eight-story building to other organizations.

Two of the 15 businesses interviewed made use of external cleaning services; the others performed cleaning duties internally (i.e., had hired employees for cleaning or who cleaned as part of their job). All 15 purchased the cleaning products used on-premises (regardless of whether cleaning was outsourced or done internally). We thus had a wide range of responses from businesses that face very different incentive structures, but all had a direct say in what is used to clean their space.

Core interview insights

Cleaning and Product Characteristics

Price was the main factor that influenced the selection of cleaning products for most of the interviewees. However, other factors could also affect how much importance was placed on price for product selection. For example, when business owners were responsible for purchasing cleaning products or were heavily involved in the process, they tended to consider other factors such as brand image, personal values, and past experiences with other products in addition to the price. On the other hand, for businesses with an operations or facilities manager, the main priority for their role seemed to be about minimizing costs, so price was the primary consideration when choosing cleaning products (i.e., what is on sale, how bulk can save money, and how the lifespan of concentrated products can be extended).

Similarly, the **scent** of cleaning products was brought up by every single interviewee. However, there was a split in opinion regarding the ideal scent of cleaning products, with some preferring a discrete scent and others associating a strong, chemical scent with effectiveness. A quote by one of the small business owners exemplifies the other line of thinking: *“if my [relative] went to buy us cleaning supplies she would come back with five things I would never buy. And you know... it would be very harsh and cheap because that's what she's been using her whole life.”*

Several interviewees noted that Cambodian employees or customers may be more likely to associate a strong chemical scent with effective cleaning products, whilst international residents may associate chemical scents more with their potential toxicity. Scent was a frequent reason cited for switching from one cleaning product to another.

The quality of cleaning products was mentioned by several interviewees, but the meaning of quality varied among them. Some people defined quality in terms of the **effectiveness** of the product (e.g., how much was needed to get the job done) and the **speed** at which it could be used, or the ease of dealing with any residues left behind. Others mentioned health concerns, such as skin irritation problems that had led to the need to switch products in the past. Overall, quality was an important factor in the selection of cleaning products, but the specific criteria that constituted quality differed among the interviewees.

There was a wide **range of formats** in which the interviewees obtained their cleaning products. Some purchased single-use bottles from retail stores, while others bought larger quantities in bulk. For businesses that were focused on minimizing costs, bulk quantities of cleaning products were often seen as a way to save money. One interviewee mentioned a preference for cleaning products that



came in concentrated form, which required dilution before use, but also necessitated training to use them properly.

Although some business owners, particularly those promoting sustainability, considered the **environmental impact** of the cleaning product, it was not necessarily the case that an enterprise attempting to reduce plastic usage in their customer-facing operations would also attempt to minimize the chemical impact on the environment or use natural products.

Purchasing and Service

In most cases, the **storage** of cleaning containers was not a problem as businesses simply chose a size that either reduced costs or fit in their storage space. However, there were some instances where empty containers needed to be stored and where the cleaning staff would either eventually dispose of them or there was an organized pickup service for the containers.

Ease of purchasing and refilling was important to businesses, not as much in terms of physical availability, but rather in terms of how it fit in with their current purchasing model or accounting tools. Some businesses preferred to use a single service or portal for all of their product needs to save time, while some wanted to simply send a text message to their supplier. Some interviewees currently used specific products because the store offered other eco-friendly/waste-reduction services such as battery

or electronics recycling – or rather, because the store they went to for eco-friendly products also offered cleaning ones.

While bulk purchasing reduces the need for frequent purchases, businesses mentioned that they were concerned about the ease and **convenience** of the refill process, including the need for advance planning and any changes to their current procedures required by the supplier's service.

Purchasing power and the potential for obtaining **preferential pricing** were also important factors in the decision-making process for businesses when selecting suppliers or products. Many businesses mentioned that they received discounts for purchasing all of their products from a single supplier, rather than paying more for the best of each product when shopping around.

Plastic pollution and sustainability

According to the interviewees, while there is an increasing number of businesses that are attempting to reduce their use of single-use plastics, the majority of businesses are not taking active steps to limit their plastic consumption. That is, descriptive **social norms** (the actions they can observe others doing) do not always align with interviewees' intentions (the action they want to be taking).

Businesses that serve international residents feel more pressure from their customers to reduce single-use plastics. Restaurants, cafes, and distilleries

owners all mentioned they were seeing a shift in the industry away from single-use plastic. Yet, interviewees also said they felt no widespread, sharp demand from Cambodians consumers to go single-use plastic-free. Interviewees did mention that they felt "a shift was on the horizon" or **shifting norms** and how consumer needs might change in the near future.

Some interviewees expressed that even though they care about sustainability, it can feel like their efforts do not matter because others are not taking action. The lack of widespread efforts to address plastic pollution may also make it easier for individuals to justify not taking steps to reduce their own plastic consumption, or to focus on other issues. In contrast, interviewees working for larger firms mentioned electricity-saving programs or employee-driven individual behavior efforts that have more **direct visibility** (and clear returns). The impact of switching to refillable cleaning products on reducing waste and costs may not feel as significant to a business compared to these other behaviors.

Because of the above, if business owners are not intrinsically motivated to reduce plastic usage – or if their client base is not primarily sustainability-oriented – there is no monetary incentive to stop using single-use plastics. One quote best highlights this dilemma: "Previously we were using Kambio I think it is, which is, yeah, kind of more environmentally friendly liquid. And that was because the previous lady who was in charge of purchasing, that was more, I think pro

[environment] and also they were doing refills. So we were doing, they had some kind of a refill system. And I think at that point I was also a bit more involved [...] then we grew and I stopped micromanaging and then decisions were made" Once these decisions were no longer made by someone intrinsically driven by environmental concern, but rather by role requirements such as cost-savings, the more environmentally-friendly behaviors were dropped.

It is worth noting that several interviewees mentioned that employees could make a profit by selling empty bulk cleaning product containers instead of disposing of them. This could lead some employees to oppose refillable products, even though it would be in the business's best interest.



Marketing and Branding

For those interviewees who owned or worked for a business that branded itself as eco-friendly or sustainable, there was a strong interest in being able to track single-use plastic reduction and report these reductions as part of their brand's **marketing efforts**. This included marketing through blog posts, social media articles, and visible physical branding. However, there were also concerns about whether this would be ignored by third-party recommendation apps like TripAdvisor and Google, and whether the increased work of marketing these plastic reductions would be worth the increased business. Eco-minded customers often look for reusable or biodegradable packaging, but not necessarily the cleaning products that companies use.

There was also interest in tracking and reporting the impact of plastic reduction efforts as a way for higher management and employees to "see the impact" of their actions and understand the importance of sustainable behaviors. **Education** and **training** to help employees understand why switching to refillable products matters was also mentioned.

Overall, there was agreement that tracking plastic reduction through the use of refillable products should not create more work. Interviewees did not have the time to analyze these reports themselves and would look for simple, relevant, and shareable metrics that are easy to visualize. One of the café owners put it best: "Okay we haven't sold this many straws; we

haven't used this many takeaway cups and you know, over a day or a week that doesn't sound like much. But when you kind of do the year and you, you know, you put that into the size of a car or a pool, that's when those numbers can be a bit more hard-hitting."

Relevant behavioral insights

The **intention-action gap** refers to the discrepancy between a person's intention to perform a certain behavior and their actual behavior. Several factors can contribute to the intention-action gap, yet these mostly reflect choice environments that sway decision-makers away from the choice they intend to make. For example, we all have finite cognitive resources. We are more likely to prioritize choices that feel more important, that are easy to pay attention to, or that have higher consequences in the moment. Additionally, people may be influenced by decision biases that lead them away from their desired choice. They also may simply be too busy or forget to follow through on their intentions. In the context of reducing single-use plastic usage, the intention-action gap can prevent people from using natural products or refills even if they intend to be more environmentally friendly.

Similarly, another challenge with introducing new, environmentally-friendly products on the market is that people often use the current price point, smell, quality, or even useability of similar products as a reference when deciding whether to purchase a new product. That is, our preferences are **reference-**

dependent. If the environmentally-friendly product is significantly more expensive than the traditional product, this may deter people from making the switch, even if they are interested in being more environmentally conscious. This intertwines with **loss aversion**, a bias that leads us to overweight the losses that might arise from our decisions. In the context of purchasing a product, loss aversion and reference dependence lead us to compare future purchases with past ones and to perceive the loss of paying more as greater than the potential gain of a higher quality or more desirable product. For example, if a person's reference point is a traditional cleaning product that costs \$10 and an environmentally-friendly alternative is available for \$12, loss aversion may lead them to choose the traditional product because the \$2 difference in price is perceived as a loss and made salient at the point of purchase.

Finally, practitioners should consider the **status quo bias** when introducing a product that feels like "a new way of doing things". Most people are inherently resistant to change and tend to stick with the products and behaviors that they are currently using and are familiar with, even if there are more environmentally-friendly options available. People may also feel uncertain about the effectiveness or convenience of refillable cleaning products (or the service provider), particularly if they have no one to look to as "proof" that said products and services fit their needs.

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Takeaways and Recommendations

Overall, most interviewees were positive about the refillable products, but few had sought – or were likely to seek – such products on their own. The plastic waste generated by cleaning products was far from top-of-mind when it came to their sustainability efforts, and those who used refills did it mainly for cost-related reasons.

From a corporate social responsibility perspective, this research revealed that many business owners in Cambodia do not believe that most of their customers are currently interested in or concerned about sustainability. Therefore, they are not motivated to adopt more environmentally-friendly practices than the ones currently bringing direct benefits (i.e., marketing value and brand identity, cost reduction, etc.). Interviewees believe that a shift towards greater environmental consciousness is coming, particularly in international resident circles, but suggested that those who are concerned about environmental issues would focus on actions such as reducing plastic packaging and single-use utensils, rather than on cleaning products. Consequently, businesses that are motivated to reduce their use of plastics in cleaning products mainly do so for intrinsic reasons, such as personal values or brand image, rather than because of external pressure or incentives. In most cases, businesses that made shifts towards eco-friendly products did so because employees or owners personally cared about plastic, rather than being driven by the fear of losing customers if they did not.

The latter point is particularly important: interviewees saw no significant drawbacks to maintaining the status quo. In other words, it was easy and relatively cost-effective for businesses to continue with their current practices. Because of this, the switch to novel, refillable products can be seen as taking a risk whereby the benefits could be worthwhile, but the new products could also prove a hassle in terms of time and effort (especially if the product fails to deliver). Since loss aversion means losses tend to be perceived as more significant than gains the benefits of making a switch should be substantial to overcome these potential perceived losses.

Recommendations

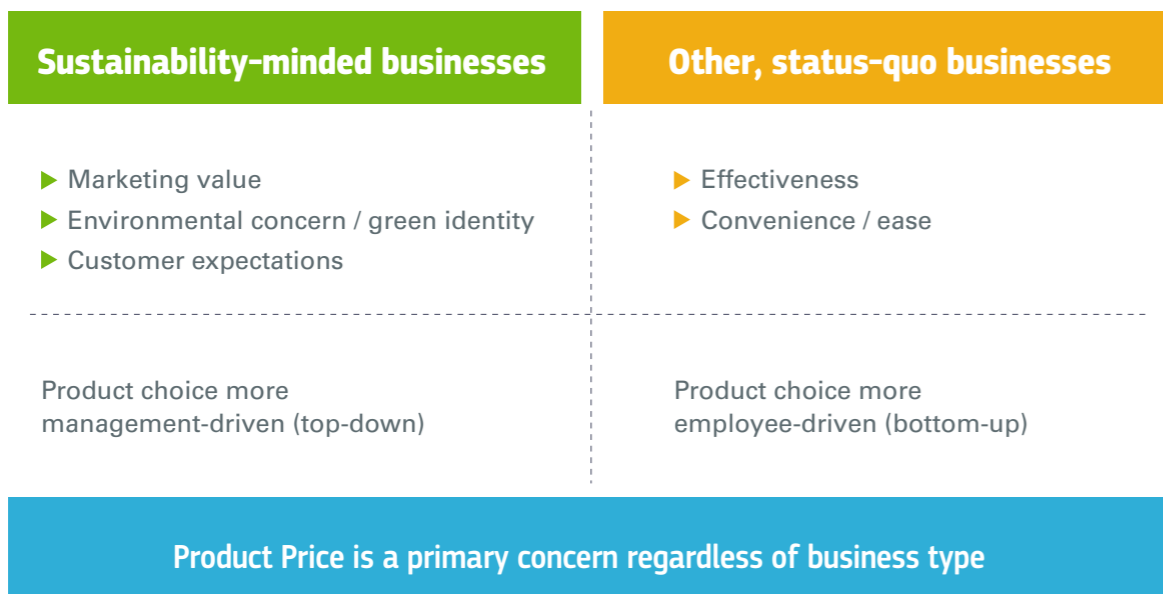
Because the main benefits of switching to refillable cleaning products will be related to the resulting environmental impact (since price, effort, and effectiveness are similar), a **plastic use tracker** may be crucial in encouraging businesses to adopt this model. The tracker should allow businesses to clearly see the environmental impact of their actions and how it changes over time, demonstrate how reducing plastic use can also lead to cost savings, and help businesses communicate their sustainability efforts to customers and stakeholders. By providing these key insights, a plastic use tracker can be an effective incentive in encouraging businesses to adopt refillable cleaning products.

At present, the most effective use of the impact tracker is for businesses that are already committed to sustainability to incorporate plastic reduction reports into their ongoing branding efforts (regardless of if they are committed for marketing purposes or because of the nature of their business). By providing transparent and accurate data on their plastic use, the tracker would allow them to further demonstrate their commitment and build trust with customers and other stakeholders. It would also be crucial that the impact of a business's actions on plastic waste is clear and presented in a way that makes it meaningful and valuable for both employees and customers.

For businesses looking to promote sustainability, it is important to:

- Emphasize that social expectations around sustainable business practices are expanding beyond just consumer behavior to include reducing operational waste wherever possible.
- Offer a variety of options for customers to customize their experiences based on their preferences and past experiences.
- Share success stories and the marketing value of plastic reduction efforts, such as attracting new customers, positive reviews, and higher sales.
- Provide tracking reports that are easily accessible and require minimal adaptation.
- Use the tracker to recognize businesses that have made the switch to refillable options and make plastic reduction the norm rather than the exception.
- Communicate a consistent and cohesive story of sustainability to align your brand with the values of your customers while showcasing your own sustainability efforts.





For businesses that cater mostly to non-sustainably minded consumers, it is unlikely that a tracker focusing solely on cleaning products would drive enough demand to warrant the “hassle” of changing cleaning products – at least not without a broader cultural shift towards environmentalism. In these cases, the tracker may be more useful in shifting the attitudes of management and employees within companies towards sustainability. This is particularly true for a tool that allows them to visualize their environmental impact clearly and promptly and to see how that relates to their operational costs. Expanding the tracker to track all plastic use within a company could also encourage businesses to see reduced plastic use through cleaning products as a cost-effective and “easy” way to make a positive impact (compared to changing other products). More work should be done to determine what would best drive the shift towards refills for these businesses, however, a tracker would likely come as an added “bonus” to maintain behavior rather than the initial driver.

For businesses that are not traditionally focused on sustainability, it is important to:

- Highlight the potential costs of sticking with traditional practices, such as environmental damage or direct expenses related to waste management.
- Offer a variety of options for customers to customize their experiences based on their preferences and past experiences.
- Offer a trial version of the product with minimal risk to the business and make the transition as seamless as possible by catering to the business’s current ordering and cleaning product processes.
- Consider offering discounts for purchasing multiple products.
- When marketing to these businesses, link plastic reduction efforts to other sustainability initiatives such as energy or water conservation.

During the development of the tracker, efforts should be made to ensure that the tool does not reinforce the idea that others are making less of an effort to reduce plastic, as human behavior is guided by what “most” others do. There should also be an emphasis on how reducing plastic waste is the right thing to do – celebrating efforts to do so and helping businesses benefit from those efforts.



For more information about behavioral science and design for the environment, visit behavior.rare.org

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