

Hartman Group: Consumers Seek Sustainability at the Shelf

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Although many consumers began recognizing sustainability as a personal responsibility, they are increasingly considering the “greater good” and turning to brands to take action, according to research firm The Hartman Group’s 2019 report, “Sustainability: Beyond Business As Usual.”

“Consumers want to see tangible ways to make change, and there’s more pressure than ever on CPG companies,” Hartman Group CEO Laurie Demeritt explained during a webinar last month.

Demeritt pointed to Swedish activist Greta Thunberg’s global climate change campaign spurring more consumers to consider sustainability in their purchasing behavior. The greater good, the planet’s health and the environment outweigh personal benefits, she added.

According to the report, air, water and soil pollution and waste are among the biggest concerns; millennial consumers are as immersed in these issues as they are about voting. Managing this anxiety about the future has become top of mind for consumers under 21, Demeritt said.

“Stress and anxiety across all elements of life has been impactful, but sustainability is one piece,” she said.

However, it can be difficult for individual consumers to feel they’re doing enough. So they are turning to the government and large companies to lead the charge.

When the Hartman Group conducted the report in 2017, personal responsibility was the highest priority. Over the past two years, the priority has shifted to entities seen as having more power than an individual, Abby Cullinan, lead analyst on the study, told NOSH. As a result, the report’s questions were updated to discover more patterns in what consumers seek about sustainability in brands.

“The political climate has pushed people to lay more cards on the table and think more explicitly about those choices,” Cullinan said.

Younger generations care more about social issues than past generations, and that translates to their food rituals, the study found. For example, recyclable straws, silverware and containers have become entwined with eating occasions. Consumers are increasingly seeking products that uphold similar beliefs when making purchasing decisions.

Although there’s an opportunity for brands to attract younger consumers through sustainable practices, companies should determine what avenue works best for their products or services.

For brands, products have to be protected. However, consumers increasingly want recyclable packaging that won’t contribute to landfills. The report found that 82% of consumers were concerned about single-use plastic, especially plastic straws.

Additionally, packaging details are important: in the Hartman report, consumers said they preferred matte packaging over shiny, and are more likely to purchase products with callouts like “Non-GMO Project Verified.” Such callouts, though, aren’t enough.

“You have to do more than just put a seal or certification behind it,” Demeritt said. “You need to do branding behind it. Otherwise, it’s not going to be differentiated from other products out there. Rather than hide what you’re doing, make them part of the journey.”

Cullinan noted that although consumers are “more hesitant to assign a halo of sustainability to larger companies,” small brands have more flexibility to use sustainability to gain consumers’ trust.

“In a way, a lot of the small brands are setting new standards for what the category should be doing in sourcing, production and the way employees are treated,” Cullinan said. “It requires a careful strategy on the part of companies to reflect on what they’re doing in ways that come across as sincere, consistent and credible to the consumer.”

Despite sustainability standards, factors such as price can change how consumers shop. The Hartman report found that 71% of consumers said they sometimes, usually or always purchase based on sustainability; 24% said they usually or always purchase; and 7% always look for sustainable products.

What has changed drastically since 2017, though, is consumer awareness around land management and agriculture, fueling more interest in sustainable practices from seed to shelf.