

# Brands and retailers look to Earth Day to boost their eco credentials

## Article

**The news:** A number of well-known brands are launching initiatives in honor of Earth Day and reflecting the trend that consumers seemingly care more about sustainability than ever before.

**Brands take action:** Brands and retailers are using a variety of tactics, from advertising campaigns highlighting recycling initiatives to new resale programs, to showcase their

commitments to sustainability.

- **The Coca-Cola Co.** is “demystifying” the plastic recycling process with an animated film featuring **Bill Nye**. The film joins Coca-Cola’s other eco-conscious campaigns, including its initiative to recycle all beverage bottles and cans collected from the NCAA Women’s and Men’s Final Fours to be reused as new packaging.
- During Earth Month, US customers can tell Alexa to “grow a tree” to donate \$1 to **One Tree Planted** in support of reforestation worldwide, per a company blog post. **Amazon** is donating \$1 million to the organization to plant 1 million trees through the rest of 2022. This comes on the heels of the retail giant’s new **eco-friendly Aware line**, announced last month.
- Food tech startup **Just Egg** is using Earth Month to name and shame lawmakers on their lack of action regarding climate change, as well as those who deny its existence.
- **Lululemon athletica** is **expanding its trade-in** and resale program nationwide, while brands including **Another Tomorrow**, **Cuyana**, and **Pacsun** all launched resale programs this month.
- **Boots**, the UK’s largest pharmacy chain, said it would stop selling wet wipes containing plastic by the end of the year. Meanwhile, US grocer **Wegmans** announced it would eliminate plastic bags across all locations by the end of the year.
- **Apple** is giving users multiple ways to learn and take action this Earth Day, from adding nature-inspired workouts on Apple Fitness+ to offering an immersive AR experience on **Snapchat** highlighting how the tech company is making its operations more sustainable. Apple will also donate \$1 to the **World Wildlife Fund** for each purchase made at an Apple store, on its website, or through its app using Apple Pay through April 22.

**The messaging:** While most companies strive to strike a tone that reflects the seriousness of the situation, Just Egg is taking a more hard-hitting approach. By noting the inaction of elected officials on environmental issues—and calling several of them out by name—the food company is both agitating for meaningful change as well as drawing attention to its brand.

- On the other hand, Amazon, Apple, and Coca-Cola are using their Earth Day campaigns to draw attention to and boost usage of their own products, while touting existing sustainability initiatives.
- Consumers are more likely to purchase from firms that advertise preventative environmental actions such as using public transportation, reactive measures like planting trees, or specific pledges (working toward carbon-neutrality, for example), per The Harris Poll.

- The same study found that ads emphasizing how humans are destroying the environment perform poorly: Just **42%** of consumers indicated they'd be more likely to buy from a company with such an ad, nearly equal to the **39%** who said it wouldn't make a difference—while nearly one in five said they would be *less* likely to support a brand that ran such an ad.

**Are these moves meaningful?** Most companies' sustainability measures should be taken with a grain of salt, particularly when it comes to retailers like Amazon and Apple, whose operations take a heavy toll on the environment.

- **Dianna Cohen**, CEO of **Plastic Pollution Coalition**, noted to Adweek that “plastic is pollution from the moment it is created, and we cannot recycle our way out of the crisis.” While Coca-Cola's recycling initiative may help reduce its footprint, it does little to address larger issues around circularity and plastic usage.
- That makes Boots' and Wegmans' decisions to limit the use of plastic in their operations a step in the right direction, but only if the alternatives they find to single-use plastics are themselves sustainable. For example, while many brands have turned to cotton totes as an alternative to plastic, **each tote would need to be used 20,000 times to offset its manufacturing impact**, per a study by the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark.
- Resale programs allow apparel brands, many of which are notorious polluters, to demonstrate their environmental commitment without overhauling their production methods.

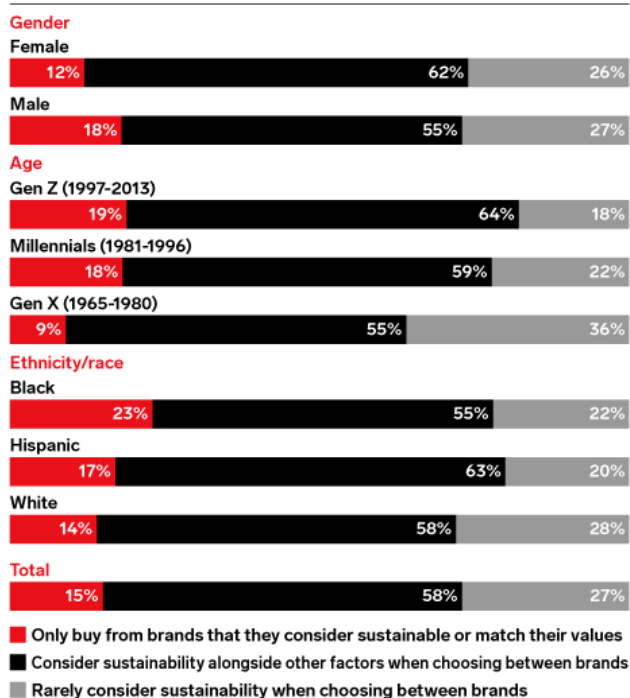
**How consumers feel:** Yet the reason companies are so quick to tout their environmental programs is that US adults increasingly care about sustainability and brand practices.

- More than three in four US adults (**76%**) are concerned about the environment and climate change, while **78%** say those topics are important to them, **per** The Harris Poll.
- More than one in five (**22%**) strongly agree they've purchased a new brand/product specifically because of its related sustainability practice, **per** Stifel and Morning Consult. Another **39%** somewhat agree with that statement—and they're willing to pay more, **per** Sensormatic Solutions.
- The same study found **20%** strongly agree they try to learn about a brand's sustainability practices before purchasing; an additional **39%** somewhat agree.
- When it came to picking brands based on their sustainability bona fides, the Stifel/Morning Consult study found males cared more than females, Gen Z cared more than millennials and Gen Xers, and Black consumers care more than Hispanic and white consumers.

- Among European consumers, **52%** completely or somewhat agree that they are willing to pay more for products whose packaging is environmentally friendly, **per** YouGov—while 55% completely or somewhat agree that they are willing to shop at a grocery store other than the one they are used to if another store offers more sustainable products.
- Employees, it should be noted, care as well: **42%** of C-level executives worldwide believe employee morale and well-being will improve based on their companies' sustainability initiatives, **per** Deloitte.

### Degree to Which Sustainability Factors into US Adults' Decision-Making About Choosing Brands, April 2021

% of respondents in each group



Note: n=4,756 who purchased clothing/footwear in the past 6 months; numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Source: Stifel and Morning Consult, "Sustainable Lifestyle Brands Index," May 25, 2021

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**The dangers of greenwashing:** While many Gen Z consumers have less disposable income than other generational cohorts, the data suggest they are willing to pay more for sustainable brands.

- The leading concern of Gen Z is climate change and protecting the environment, **per** a separate Deloitte study—outweighing all other concerns, including income inequality, unemployment, and healthcare.

- Besides getting in trouble with consumers, there's also the little matter of the law: **Walmart** and **Kohl's** recently **settled with the FTC** over misleading advertising that suggested products were made with bamboo when they were made of rayon. Walmart also used phrases such as “eco-friendly & sustainable” and “renewable and environmentally sustainable” without backing up those claims. The UK is **fighting back** against greenwashing as well.
- In March, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced a panel to determine **whether companies' initiatives to curb climate change are legitimate or could be classified as greenwashing**.
- More brands are glomming onto the trend, with some focusing more on verbiage rather than behind-the-scenes practices. **Products labeled “sustainable” increased 176% from 2019 to 2021, per** retail research group Edited.

**The big takeaway:** Indicators suggest consumers want to see brands taking specific action as opposed to generic support of sustainability. However, in many cases, true sustainability is at odds with companies' goals to sell more goods to consumers.

- As consumers get savvier about what it means to live a fully eco-friendly lifestyle, brands will have to truly commit to circularity and sustainability throughout their supply chain in order to win their loyalty.
- Instead of showcasing their dedication to improving the environment every April, brands and retailers will have to reiterate their green bona fides year round.