

Why it's time to pull the plug on plastic bags

Sarah Howe
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Scrapping plastic bags may lead to some inconvenience for customers at first, but the PR benefits would outweigh any short term pain, argues Sarah Howe

To change the mindset of the general public, any marketer will need to tap into something that has a big impact on daily lives – human interest always prevails in marketing.

Even if you are bored to tears already with the issue of plastic carrier bags and the red tops' campaigns against the mighty Tesco, when you see a week-long series of Plastic Planet special reports on the BBC 10 o'clock news, you have got to admit that this topic is not only important, but has captured the consciousness and imagination of the British public.

Negative impact?

The negative environmental impact of plastic in general, and specifically the futile plastic carrier bag, is indisputable. And it is hardly a small problem when you consider some 13 billion plastic bags are handed out at the tills in the UK every year.

With China having already banned free bags in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, why on earth is a supposedly developed and sophisticated economy, such as the one in the UK, with supposedly sophisticated retailers and marketers, still failing to address the issue? I am not bored with the topic but I am bored with the debate: Should we? Shouldn't we? What will consumers think? How should we gently ease them into becoming plastic neutral? What should we offer them instead?

The fact is the UK's big retailers are being dumb from a marketing perspective and annoyingly indecisive. The killing-off of the plastic bag is potentially a peach of a marketing opportunity. Plus, what better a way to show how corporately and socially responsible you are as a brand by taking swift and clear action on a media hot potato.

A *Times* survey, conducted by Populus, on 2 April 2008 also confirmed what is blatantly obvious on this issue – that consumers are smarter than the retailers. Although 72 per cent of consumers think reward points are the most effective way to reduce the number of bags used in supermarkets (well, of course we'd all like extra points thank you very much), 56 per cent believe that supermarkets should just cease to offer plastic bags. On balance, a retailer taking action would be welcomed by customers.

Opportunities lie ahead

So, has the positive impact this opportunity could have on a retail brand been lost, is it already too late for one of our supermarkets to announce that they are going to ban the nuisance things? I think that if one of them had been swift and brave enough to announce this three months ago, they may have got some flak from the media and some customers in the short-term, but it would have positively enhanced their brand and reputation in the long-term. And, even if one of them takes the decision tomorrow, it will still be beneficial from a marketing perspective.

Furthermore, it is not all about marketing impact, but sales, as well as customer acquisition and retention. If a retailer were to announce that it is banning free plastic carrier bags in its stores, might the positive impact be even greater from a sales perspective because it would be retaining and strengthening loyalty from some of its highest value customers?

Apart from anything else, why on earth aren't our retailers using power positively and responsibly? In his Budget last month, Alistair Darling told supermarkets that he expected them either to abolish plastic bags or to start charging to encourage a switch to green alternatives. It is a blunt ultimatum and one that retailers really should be adhering to.

A government having to legislate against plastic bags would be quite ridiculous. So please, Mr or Mrs Retail giant out there, take action now! What are you scared of? That you will have some weeks of very irate customers to deal with or lose a few customers? I think you are big and capable enough to cope.

As long as you give us a little notice, we will all get over it and forgive you – maybe even thank you for forcing us to be good. If people can be made to wear seatbelts and stop smoking in public, I'm sure they will be able to tear themselves away from plastic carrier bags, but this time without legislation. It would finally be a case of the powerful hand of the retail giant doing good, to ultimately do well itself.

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