

CHRISTINE GALLUP
Genomatica, San Diego, CA, USA

Consumers hold brands accountable for producing sustainable goods

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, cosmetics, personal care, CSR, communications, trends.

ABSTRACT

Consumers are opening their wallets to sustainable products and brands – and boycotting dirty ones. A new survey by Genomatica, an innovative biotech company, put a spotlight on product ingredients, their origins and the desire for transparency. As a company that creates commercial biobased processes to make widely-used chemicals that enable better, more sustainable everyday products, Genomatica wanted to learn more about consumers' attitudes towards sustainability. Our survey was conducted in July 2019 and included 1,000 consumers (1). Below are some highlights of what we discovered. Approximately one in four (26 percent) say they would spend more money with their favorite brand if it increased its sustainability efforts. Some 46 percent of consumers say they've boycotted a brand in the past. Of those, 24 percent boycotted the brand have done so because of unsustainable products and 23 percent acted due to unsustainable practices.

is a good goal, many are finding it difficult to put into practice.

Nearly half (48 percent) report that convenience, lack of awareness and availability are top obstacles to buying more sustainable products. For almost one-fourth, not knowing what products are sustainable is the biggest obstacle that keeps them from purchasing eco-friendly goods.

While motivated to do better, understanding the sustainability of products often proves just too hard. Starting with the basics: 55 percent are surprised to learn that some of the ingredients in everyday products such as certain baby sunscreen lotions are derived from fossil fuels, like crude oil, rather than being naturally-sourced from plants. Some 71 percent feel "bothered" or "disgusted" when they learn of these origins. When shopping, 56 percent of consumers say they look at the ingredients on the packaging, but three-quarters of those label-lookers don't know what half of the ingredients are.



GET WITH THE PROGRAM: STEP UP SUSTAINABILITY

According to our survey, modern buyers are looking for "healthy for me and healthy for the planet" choices. They believe brands should take primary responsibility for developing sustainable products. Among respondents, 38 percent believe brands have the greatest responsibility to make sure products are sustainable and 48 percent believe brands should absorb the added costs, if any, of making a product more sustainable.

CONSUMERS FEEL IT'S TOO HARD TO BE SUSTAINABLE

Knowing what makes a product sustainable can be challenging. Sustainability is a broad term and while 95 percent of the consumers that we surveyed said sustainability



Recognizing this need, many brands and retailers are taking strides to educate buyers on their products. Lorraine Dallmeier, director of the accredited online organic cosmetic science school Formula Botanica, believes transparency is particularly key for beauty brands (2).

"There are a lot of shoppers out there who feel that you should be able to go to beauty brands and say, it's really important to me that you use this particular ingredient or I'm specifically looking for a formulation that contains X, Y or Z. So being transparent about your products, about your ingredients and where you've sourced them, how you source them, sustainability, everything like that – a lot of consumers now want brands to have that in place."

Some brands focus their efforts on transparency around ingredient sourcing, sharing details including the location and time ingredients are harvested. Others offer a full pricing breakdown for every product. And still, other brands focus on reporting what is NOT inside of the bottle. This is more likely to be seen on "clean beauty" labels that list the 'harmful' substances excluded from their personal care formulations.



CONSUMERS ARE SKEPTICAL OF BRAND SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES

Despite brands' education efforts, 40 percent of consumers remained "pretty skeptical" about what brands say about their sustainability practices. According to the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer study, only about half of the general population trusts business, government, media, and non-governmental organizations to do the right thing. (3) The skepticism usually reserved for politicians or big businesses now includes media outlets such as news stations and social media feeds. This crisis of trust calls for brands to be accountable. Consumers are reading the back labels of products, searching for the hidden 'gotcha.' Brands that offer clarity here, not only around product ingredients but also factors such as sourcing and company ethics, are likely to gain the trust of their consumers.

BACK UP THE CLAIMS

To help beauty brands communicate more clearly and transparently, it's helpful to engage with partners along the supply chain to substantiate their products and services with verified valuations provided by reputable third-parties. Products like Brontide™ natural butylene glycol have undergone a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). This is a systematic, third-party analysis that produces comparative data allowing brands to make verifiable and transparent sustainability claims. These systematic evaluations of the production process span from cradle to gate. Verifiable insights provided by LCAs that are quantifiable and rooted in science help to build consumer trust in personal care brands.

TELL THE WHOLE STORY

As companies strive to align their strategies with sustainability goals

and commitments, transparency will be key. Joel Makower, chairman and executive editor of GreenBiz Group, addresses the topic of accountability with an approach that goes beyond creating a corporate sustainability report and entails engaging in diverse conversations with customers and critics alike.

A corporate sustainability report may start the conversation, but listening to consumers and understanding their wants and needs can expand the dialogue and can spark the kind of product innovation that drives real change.

REFERENCES

1. Consumers Agree: It's Too Hard to be Sustainable? Genomatica website: <https://www.genomatica.com/consumers-surprised-everyday-products-made-from-crude-oil/> Accessed October 12, 2019
2. Dallmeier, Lorraine (Producer). (2019, October 22) Green Beauty Conversation [Audio podcast]. Retrieve from <https://formulabotanica.com/podcast-clean-beauty-redefinition/>
3. Edelman Trust Barometer Edelman website: <https://www.edelman.com/research/2017-edelman-trust-barometer/> Accessed October 29, 2019 ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Gallup leads Genomatica's specialty chemicals business communications efforts and is also a proud collaborator in the company's social responsibility/sustainability initiatives. Christine's experience in sustainability communications and journalism has strengthened her personal passion to make sustainability irresistible.

