



Greenwashing Coffee: Instead of Working With Existing Eco-Products, Starbucks Will Reinvent the Wheel & Stamp Their Logo on it

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GREEN IS GOOD

by Meg White

For a whole generation of Americans, recycling was the first thing we were taught as children to do for the environment. Whether you learned about it from the Three Rs or Captain Planet, the idea of repurposing used material has been a part of our environmental consciousness for many years.

Apparently, the largest coffee retailer on the planet is too cool for school. At this year's annual meeting, only 11 percent of Starbucks shareholders voted to initiate a comprehensive recycling plan. For a company that asserts it shares "our customers' commitment to the environment," the negligence in one of the simplest areas of environmental stewardship came as a shock to all who imagine Starbucks to be as green as their logo. While you'd expect outrage from the eco-blogs, former investment banker Sarah Gilbert at Daily Finance rips into the greenwashing hypocrisy with somewhat surprising tenacity:

Starbucks, which has been spending much of its marketing money on promoting its "Shared Planet" initiatives lately, believes it's doing enough.

The Seattle-based company imprints its paper cups with self-laudatory claims about buying "responsibly grown, ethically traded coffee" from "farmers who are good to their workers, community and planet," mentioning the partnership with Conservation International -- and then tosses all these cups into the trash, along with plastic cold drink cups, pastry and sandwich wrappers and a load of other rubbish.

The thing about recycling is that it's just not as cool as it used to be. As we flocked to buy new funny-looking light bulbs and chic reusable tote bags, involvement in recycling declined from 54 percent in 1992 to a paltry 33 percent last year, according to [As You Sow](#), the environmental foundation responsible for bringing the recycling initiative to a vote at the Starbucks annual meeting.

Part of the problem is with the consumer, but newer, less universally-recyclable packaging also shares some of the blame. And the humble paper cup is a bigger menace

than it appears to be. There are some suggestions that it could be worse for the environment than Styrofoam. Furthermore, their ubiquitous nature means that an estimated 23 billion of these suckers will be thrown away this year alone -- enough to circle the globe 88 times when placed end-to-end.

Starbucks blames the "wide variance in municipal recycling capabilities" for their reluctance to find a solution to their recycling problem. And to be fair, having a global presence surely affects the practicality and applicability of a company-wide recycling program.

But if the U.S. military can do it, why can't Starbucks? Back in 2005, the military seized on a compostable paper cup with a special lining that keeps hot coffee from seeping through and from burning soldiers' fingers while still being able to biodegrade without harming the natural environment.

The cup was soon mass-produced by International Paper, which named it the "ecotainer." It has had some success, and was adopted by at least one major coffee retailer more than two years ago. The ecotainer family has been expanding and now they are designed to hold food and cold beverages as well. International Paper is working on integrating recycled content into the containers, as well as trying to source more from renewable plant materials in the U.S.

The containers are recyclable wherever "poly-coated paperboard and packaging" is accepted. But, since it is compostable, customers at least have the option to take matters into their own hands.

No matter how militant you are about bringing your own reusable cup to Starbucks, I'm sure there will be a moment when you need a coffee and don't have a ready vessel. It happens to the best of us. So having the option to compost the cup yourself -- especially if your municipality's recycling program is such that you can't just recycle the thing -- is a huge plus. Furthermore, even if such a material ends up in a landfill, where your average paper cup takes decades to biodegrade and releases harmful chemicals in the process, a compostable cup is going to break down faster and in a safer way.

Since these containers are widely available to corporations, I have to assume that Starbucks' shareholders made the calculation that it's just not worth the extra money it would take to buy these cups. Studies cited by International Paper, however, show that consumers are willing to pay extra for such packaging. Furthermore, I have to assume that a corporation with the overwhelming market share and buying power of Starbucks could probably strike a pretty lucrative deal with International Paper if it decided to go with the ecotainers.

Instead, the company boasts of the 10 percent of recycled material in their non-recyclable cups, which they proudly claim are "the first such cups in the industry." They say they're going from city to city to create "a recycling infrastructure that'll take our cups -- and frankly everyone else's cups -- for recycling."

How nice of them.

Instead of using already-existing technology, the company pledges to "develop a comprehensive recyclable cup solution by 2012." This goes quite nicely with their timeline to put recycling bins in their stores by 2015, something that could be immediately achieved in virtually every store located in a municipality that currently accommodates corporate recycling. Presumably they need a few years to dream up some designer recycling bins with the Starbucks logo on them.

Starbucks eschews the simple, easy solutions for the fancy ones. As Gilbert points out, why can't baristas be trained to ask "For here, or to go?" just as easily as they are to say "Welcome to Starbucks"? Such a cost-free change would likely get Starbucks closer to that "25 percent of the beverages made in our stores in reusable serveware or tumblers" well before the stated goal of 2015 (they're at 1.5 percent now).

You're more likely to hear the company boast of its first LEED-certified store in Seattle and its high-tech water-saving technology. Clearly these are positive changes as well, but they have the taint of greenwashing when more conventional action items are pushed so far down the road.

Perhaps the best example of Starbucks' disregard for one of the oldest and simplest ways to reduce waste is their Ethos bottled water. For nearly \$2, you can buy a bottle of water and Starbucks will offset your guilt by donating five cents to a charity benefiting poor people in Africa. Ethos has been criticized as a "profit-making enterprise disguised as humanitarian relief," and that it "is exploiting the plight of Africans to sell more bottled water."

That plastic bottle of water isn't doing any favors for the environment either. Starbucks is way behind Pepsi, Coca Cola and other competitors in that it has no commitment to produce bottles with any recycled content, or to ensure that more of the Ethos bottles are recycled in the first place.

One would think that Ethos would be a signal to Starbucks that they can profit by doing good. It is evidence that Starbucks customers are willing and able to pay more for a product that claims to do good. But the lack of shareholder movement on a no-brainer such as recycling illustrates that for Starbucks to act on its green credentials, change must arrive riding a flashy white horse with LEED certification, not in a humble recycling bin.

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