



Consumer goods giant Unilever and Ikea buy into green myth

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Two more companies have fallen under the spell of what I call green mythology. **As You Sow**, an activist group based in Oakland, CA, known for holding the feet of shareholders of large corporations to the fire, just announced that consumer goods giant Unilever (London) has committed to making 100% of its packaging recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025. And last month, furniture giant Ikea (Leiden, Netherlands) announced that it would reduce its consumption of expanded polystyrene by 8,000 tons a year.

Unilever posted a press release on its website, noting that its new stance on plastics packaging will help “accelerate progress toward the circular economy.” Unilever said it has “already committed to reduce the weight of the packaging it uses this decade by one third by 2020, and increase its use of recycled plastic content in its packaging to at least 25% by 2025, against a 2015 baseline, as part of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan.”

As You Sow’s release noted: “The shareholder advocacy organization **As You Sow** has been engaging the company for more than a year to make its packaging recyclable, focusing especially on multi-laminate plastic sachets and pouches used for shampoos in small packages marketed in Asia that cannot currently be recycled,” said **As You Sow’s** release. “Much of this packaging is discarded and ends up polluting waterways in developing Asian countries due to the lack of solid waste management systems.”

Unilever stated in **As You Sow’s** release that “it would work in partnership with governments and other stakeholders to support scaling up of collection and reprocessing of infrastructure . . .” **As You Sow** hopes that Unilever’s timetable can be accelerated from the 2025 goal because of ever-increasing plastic waste being thrown into the ocean. **As You Sow** notes that Unilever is the third large consumer products company to commit to the program, the other two being Procter & Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive, both of which have “pledged to make all packaging recyclable in three of four operating divisions and to use 50% recycled content by 2020.”

Unilever noted that “treating plastic packaging as a valuable resource to be managed efficiently and effectively is a key priority in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption & Production) and, in doing so, shifting away from a ‘take-make-dispose’ model of consumption to one which is fully circular.” The company is working with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and its “circular economy goals for plastic packaging . . . to turn the New Plastics Economy into reality,” said Ellen MacArthur.

Paul Polman, Unilever CEO, said in the company’s release: “Our plastic packaging plays a critical role in making our products appealing, safe and enjoyable for our consumers. Yet it is clear that if we want to continue to reap the benefits of this versatile material, we need to do much more as an industry to help ensure it is managed responsibly and efficiently post consumer-use.”

Ikea suffering from “environmental delusion,” per EPS Industry Alliance

Last month, Ikea’s Chief Executive Peter Agnefjall said the furniture company would reduce its expanded polystyrene (EPS) consumption by 8,000 tons a year, but did not cite any specific benefit for this effort. The EPS Industry Alliance (EPS-IA) accused Ikea of “environmental delusion” over its decision to phase oil-based polystyrene from its flat packs and replace it with fiber-based packaging.

In a statement released Jan. 20, the EPS-IA said: “It is commonplace for corporations to link eco-advancements directly to the elimination of plastics, often in the name of unfounded environmental responsibility. Global consumers should expect more from Ikea, which holds a long-standing public image of environmental stewardship, especially given the fact that their brand has a strong tie to sustainability.

“In this instance, it is especially disconcerting to see Ikea leading into environmental delusion, making it appear as if 8,000 tons of EPS are a significant waste reduction with no tangible point of reference or offer any meaningful information on the environmental trade-offs of paper alternatives.”

In other words, there is not a shred of scientific basis for Ikea’s decision to eliminate the use of EPS packing material. If Ikea’s CEO is so afraid of whatever activist group is threatening the company in some way—for the record, I’m speculating—that it feels compelled to eliminate EPS on the false premise that this material is not recyclable (It is!) or reclaimable, Ikea is leading its customers down a path of misinformation.

“The belief that paper is better than plastics is not based on scientific fact, but rather on misconceptions about how plastic products are made, how landfills work, the incidence of plastic litter and how non-biodegradable products negatively impact the planet. Research has proven that paper production typically consumes more resources, has a higher carbon foot print and generates significantly more waste than plastics, even when recycling is taken into account,” said the EPS-IA.

The alternative Ikea may choose after it discontinues using EPS is EcoCradle, a mycelium-based material manufactured from mushrooms. Yes, mushrooms! Graduates from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute found that mushroom roots naturally adhere to wood chips and digest them. Mixing agricultural waste (animal manure?) and mushroom roots produces this substitute for Styrofoam.

I don’t know about you, but I prefer my mushrooms stuffed with crab and served on a bed of arugula with a glass of wine. Of course, perhaps the EcoCradle is edible: After you’ve finished unpacking your IKEA furniture and putting it together, you can sit down for a lovely snack!

If you look at the website of ActivistFacts.com, a group that tracks activist environmental groups (and there are dozens of them), you can also see the monetary supporters of some of them. Generally, supporters include competitors of those companies in the plastics industry, which tells you that the motives of activist groups like **As You Sow** are not totally “green” oriented. They are paid to go after these big corporations to get rid of plastics in favor of other materials—some green, mostly recyclable (metals, glass and paper)—most of which do not reduce the carbon footprint in any significant way.

Ultimately, science will prevail but it will take the plastics industry to get as active as environmental groups in approaching consumer OEMs and educating them about the science of plastics before these companies will begin to push back.