Case Studies

Reducing Carrier Bag Use

This report contains case studies from UK retailers. They detail how retailers are helping consumers to achieve major reductions in the use of carrier bags and how check-out colleagues are playing a significant role in making this happen. The case studies show how retailers have worked with consumers to help reduce carrier bag numbers and to prompt reuse.

Please address any enquiries to either the main Press Office contact for each company or directly to WRAP at retail@wrap.org.uk.

Further information about carrier bags can be found at http://www.wrap.org.uk/bags

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WRAP helps individuals, businesses and local authorities to reduce waste and recycle more, making better use of resources and helping to tackle climate change.

Written by: These case studies were written by UK retailers and are reported by WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) working with Defra, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland.
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1.0 Asda

1.1 2008

In June 2008, ASDA is thought to have led the way in the UK with the removal of all single-use carrier bags from view at their checkouts. This gave more control to their staff to encourage customers to choose a 'Bag for Life'.

Customer research and feedback led ASDA to revamp their range of reusable bags to give customers more choice, making sustainability affordable for everyone. They introduced a 5p 'Bag for Life' and added two new jute bags and two non-woven bags to the range. These initiatives have resulted in over 1,200% increase in the sale of reusable bags.

New in-store promotional materials gave extra prominence to the new range and their slogan of 'Saving the Planet One Bag at a Time' was widely used throughout the store and on car park banners.

ASDA FM and the stores’ magazine did regular features on bag re-use to reach their customers and staff were fully briefed and motivated through internal promotional channels (TV, magazines, bulletin briefings, table talkers and incentive schemes).

During the retailers’ busiest time over Christmas, ASDA launched a colleague incentive scheme which rewarded the top stores for the highest and most improved bag reductions. This resulted in the biggest monthly reduction percentage in 2008, not to mention a significant rise in sales of reusable bags.

In addition to reducing bag usage, ASDA has limited the environmental impact of bags themselves by decreasing their size and increasing their recycled content. As well as reducing the thickness of bags, they have also removed the colour to make them stronger. In-store recycling schemes ensure that the plastic is re-used - in 2008 alone over 250 tonnes of carrier bags were collected.

In the second half of 2008, ASDA reduced its carrier bag usage by over half a billion bags.

1.2 Early 2009

ASDA is continuing to build on the campaign and has set challenging bag reduction targets with store managers, along with further staff incentives.

New in-store materials are in place with the slogans 'ASDA, Saving You Money Every Day*' and 'Don't forget to reuse your bags!' The promotional package includes new highly visible trolley bay displays to remind customers to take their bags into store from the boot of their cars. Key elements are branded with 'Act on CO2' or 'Waste Aware Scotland' logos, showing that ASDA is partnering with government departments to encourage customers to become more sustainable.

A new in-store display unit was launched on all of the main bank checkouts through January and February 2009 to encourage further sales of the reusable bag range.

All of this activity is again supported by ASDA FM and through regular features in the magazine.

(*In January 2009, ASDA unveiled a new campaign 'Saving You Money Every Day' aimed at showing customers how they are able to continually lower prices and save customers money. By cutting out unnecessary costs from their business, ASDA has saved millions of pounds by using less energy and reducing the number of carrier bags given out. The money saved is given back to customers through lowering product prices.)
"When it comes to carrier bags we are trying to change the habit of a lifetime, but not at our customers’ expense. Instead of penalising shoppers at a time when they are already feeling the pinch, we want to incentivise customers who choose a re-usable bag. We have also achieved our first carrier bag free store in London. Here we trialled the total removal of free issue carrier bags and colleagues have run a ‘bag for life’ giveaway, coupled with encouraging customers to remember their reusable bags on every visit. This has been so successful that it is being extended to other outlets now."

Paul Hedley, Corporate Policy Manager for Sustainability & Ethics, ASDA Stores Ltd.

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2.0 Somerfield *

Since 2006, Somerfield has promoted the use of ‘Bags for Life’ by exchanging five disposable bags, which are ready to be recycled, for a free ‘Bag for Life’. The new bag can then be replaced free of charge throughout its life.

Somerfield has also introduced a smaller bag in all of its 800 stores that can be used for last minute and top-up shopping trips. This uses 40% less material than normal sized bags.

Finally, they have introduced a new re-usable bag called the Charity Tote Shopper for Macmillan Cancer Support. This is an alternative to ‘single-use’ bags and has raised £200,000 for the charity.

"Somerfield has cut carrier bag use by at least 355 million bags since 2006. Engaging all key business owners and our Customers has driven these fantastic results. This collective team has driven the reduction of single-use carrier bags without any negative impact to our customers. Our stores have been instrumental in implementing change and increasing awareness and knowledge."

Richard Beale, CSR and Procurement Director, Somerfield.

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(* In March 2009, The Co-operative Group completed the acquisition of Somerfield plc).

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3.0 Sainsbury’s

Sainsbury’s has been encouraging customers to reduce the number of single-use carrier bags for the past two years and during that time, has seen a significant shift in consumer behaviour, with more and more customers purchasing bags for life and bringing these and single-use bags back to be used again.

The growth of this trend is best exemplified in the increase seen in the uptake of our Nectar point reward scheme. In June 2008, Sainsbury’s began awarding Nectar points for every bag reused at the checkout. When the scheme was launched, they were giving out around 2.9m points per month, whereas now, they are giving out over 4m per month. Some 43% of active Nectar card holders are now re-using bags, and Sainsbury’s has given out over 300 million points in total, showing that customers really are beginning to change their habits.

The reduction in carrier bag usage has come about as a result of a three part strategy, ‘remind, reward, remove’, whereby customers are reminded to reuse carrier bags when they shop, rewarded with Nectar points for each bag they reuse and plastic bags have been removed from sight at checkouts.

Sainsbury’s conducted research last year, which revealed that the biggest barrier to customers reducing their bag usage is that nearly half of those surveyed forgot to either bring them back into store or to take them out of the car boot.

In response, Sainsbury’s devoted its ‘Make The Difference Day’ on 19 April 2008 to this issue by giving all customers a free fridge magnet and car sticker, reminding them to take their old bags with them when they go shopping. This was accompanied by car park posters and in store radio, point of sale and checkout reminders.

In addition, the company changed its checkout process in March 2008 so that customers are now asked if they have brought any bags back for re-use. If they haven’t remembered, they are reminded that they can purchase a ‘bag for life’ and also that recycling units are located at the front of the store.

Changing this process involved 100,000 checkout staff being trained to talk about the issue of plastic bags to over 18 million customers a week across 18,000 till points.

Company research also showed that nearly three quarters (73%) of customers want to be rewarded for reusing their shopping bags, which is why Sainsbury’s started awarding Nectar points for re-use of bags.

In October 2008, Sainsbury’s removed free carrier bags from check-outs in all its stores (excluding convenience). The bags are still available but hidden from sight at the tills.

On top of this strategy, the company also increased the recycled content in its orange carrier bags to 50% from 33%. This reduced the virgin plastic content from 57% to 40%.

"Sainsbury’s is fully committed to reducing the number of free carrier bags used by its shoppers and has reduced the number of bags issued to customers significantly.

"By working with our customers to achieve this reduction we believe we are bringing about long-term behavioural change. This is why the number of Nectar points given for bag re-use has increased from 2.9m to over 4m per month."

Alison Austin, Sainsbury’s Environmental Manager

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4.0 Tesco

Since the launch of Tesco’s Green Clubcard Points scheme in August 2006, shoppers have significantly reduced the number of plastic carrier bags used within three years. This has removed more than three billion bags from circulation and has rewarded customers with points for reusing their bags.

Plastic bags have now been removed from view in all Tesco stores and are only made available if the customer needs them. The retailer has also installed plastic bag recycling units inside its stores.

To reinforce this messaging Tesco has introduced signage both in store and in car parks to remind their shoppers to reuse their carrier bags. In addition, the company stocks a range of reusable bags and launched a limited edition designer range of reusable bags by Cath Kidston. Each bag was made from nine recycled plastic bottles with 50p from every sale going to Marie Curie Cancer Care.

The online arm of the company, Tesco.com, offer a bagless delivery option and rewards customers with extra Clubcard Points if they choose to have their shopping delivered without carrier bags. Currently around 50% of customers choose this option.

“Initiatives like Green Clubcard Points and our collaboration with Cath Kidston who designed a limited edition range of reusable bags has helped Tesco customers to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags in use. We’ve also installed signs in our stores and car parks to remind our customers to re-use their own bags. We think that the approach of encouragement and reward is effective and sustainable.”

Ruth Girardet, Community and Corporate Responsibility Director, Tesco

Press Office Contact: Adam Fisher on 01992 644 645.

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5.0 The Co-operative Group

5.1 Dual use for carrier bags

Shoppers at Co-operative Food stores in Oldham, near Manchester, can now buy home compostable carrier bags. Not only can the bag be reused for shopping, it can ultimately be disposed of as a food waste caddy liner.

The bags, believed to be the only certified bag of their kind in the UK, cost 6p each. Their availability and low price point is encouraging residents to recycle their food waste more and is helping to reduce waste going to landfill.

In 2010, The Co-operative worked in partnership with Oldham Council to help promote the bags and to encourage household participation around food waste collection. The campaign was so successful that it has contributed towards Oldham Council being the largest recycler of food waste in the north of England. Oldham is also in the top three performing councils for recycling in the Greater Manchester area. The carrier bag campaign won a Green Apple Award and an Association for Organics Recycling (AFOR) Award.

“Partnering with Oldham Council on this unique project enables us to respond to our members and customers, who tell us that safeguarding the environment is a top priority. At the same time we have helped the Council to achieve its own green targets.” said Iain Ferguson, Environment Manager of The Co-operative Group.

All food waste collected by the council is composted for agricultural and horticultural use across the UK, reducing the need for chemical fertilisers that contribute towards climate change.

Bag specifics

The bags are certified to the new AFOR standard as well as the usual EN 13432. This means that they can be used for home composting vegetable waste as well as being suitable for municipal composting. The text on the front and back faces of the bag is aimed at giving customers the information that they need, with the text in the gusset carrying a large and prominent seedling logo for collection crews. The bags are also pale green to help crews to identify them easily and quickly.

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The Co-operative Group and their sister Co-operative Societies have undertaken a number of initiatives across the country to reduce the number of plastic bags they give away. The Co-operative Group now has a national carrier bag strategy and has significantly reduced the number of free plastic carrier bags issued. Although there has been an increase in the sales of ‘bags for life’, this is much, much smaller than the reduction in numbers of give away bags.

5.2 West Yorkshire

In Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, the Co-operative Group (formerly a United Co-operative Society) store provided the blueprint for the Co-operative Group’s national carrier bag strategy. The outlet reduced the number of plastic carrier bags given away, as part of a wider local campaign, by removing the bags from direct customer access so they were available on request only. Smaller bags were provided for customers buying fewer items and cotton and reusable bags were recommended to customers and placed in a prominent position in-store. Information about the local campaign was also displayed in-store to inform customers about the changes.

The number of bags given away fell by 78% in the weeks following the introduction of the initiative and turnover and customer numbers remained unaffected.

5.3 Midcounties

The Midcounties Co-operative Society’s small convenience stores in Woodford Halse in Northamptonshire and Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire have both stopped the free issue of carrier bags. Research showed that the initiative would be well supported by the local communities so instead of handing out free carrier bags, staff encouraged customers to purchase a Co-operative ‘bag for life’, a Fairtrade cotton bag or compostable carrier bags. They also introduced a carrier bag recycling facility at each store.

Through the success of the initiative, both shops have achieved a 100% reduction in the issue of free plastic carrier bags, and a 40 - 45% increase in sales of ‘bags for life’. More importantly, they have seen a significant increase in the number of customers who are using their own bags.

5.4 Plymouth & South West

The Plymouth & South West Co-operative Society currently has seven stores that are plastic carrier bag free, while the remaining 62 stores in the Society have removed plastic bags from direct customer access. Staff have been trained in how to deal with customer queries and encourage shoppers to use more sustainable options.

Sales in this region of ‘bags for life’ have increased by 426% from 2007 to 2008, and over 23,000 cotton bags were sold, against a zero baseline at the beginning of the period. The volume of standard plastics bags given to customers has reduced by nearly 60% in tonnage.

“These initiatives convinced us that, with the help of our customers, we could make a real difference to how carrier bags are given away.”

Iain Ferguson, Commercial Packaging Manager, The Co-operative Group

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(Note: In March 2009, The Co-operative Group completed the acquisition of Somerfield plc).
6.0 Waitrose

Between March and May 2008 Waitrose trialled a number of initiatives in four of its branches: Cirencester, Otley, Buckhurst Hill and Harrogate. The aim was to reduce the number of single-use plastic bags given away and involved:

- Removal of bags from view at main checkouts;
- Asking customers without their own bags if they would prefer to purchase a 10p ‘bag for life’; and
- Asking customers at basket checkouts if they needed a bag.

Waitrose monitored the impact on the number of transactions, any increase in sales of their ‘bags for life’ and the decrease in the number of single-use carrier bags given away. As some customers use single-use carrier bags as bin liners, impact on the sales of bin liners was also measured to see if a reduction in single-use carrier bags would lead to an increase in sales.

During this three month period sales of ‘bags for life’ rose by approximately 1100% which, then after four or five weeks started to fall, indicating that customers were reusing them. The number of single-use carrier bags given out fell between 45 and 60% and there was no impact on trade or the sale of bin liners.

Waitrose also collected customer feedback and found that customers were happy to reuse their bags but often forgot to bring them from the car into the store. Therefore the company introduced prominent signage at the store entrance as a reminder to customers.

These successful trial initiatives formed Waitrose’s national carrier bag strategy and have now been implemented across all 213 stores.

"Waitrose continues to be fully committed to reducing the use of single-use carrier bags and the voluntary agreement has made a real difference."

Amy Luxford, Manager - Branch Operating Procedures, Waitrose

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