

# Who Is A Sustainable Consumer? Activating The Eco-Mindset

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## Problem of practice

While majority of consumers globally believe that environmentally sustainable consumption is important, only a minority act on that belief. This intention–action gap matters not only for public policy but also for companies. As an increasing number of nations require companies to reduce their carbon footprint, companies have moved to develop operations, products and services with reduced environmental impact. However, the ‘elusive green consumer’ phenomenon persists: many people say they want green products, yet their purchases tell another story. So how can organisations and marketers nudge customer behaviour towards more eco-friendly choices? Recent [research](#) by Manuel Reppmann, Stephan Harms, Laura Marie Edinger-Schons, and Johann Nils Foege suggests that firms can activate the sustainable attitude in most consumers by directly involving them in corporate sustainability initiatives.<sup>1</sup> When customers participate in a company’s sustainability efforts – for example, giving feedback on green practices or joining recycling programs – they often develop a sense of ownership in the mission, which in turn motivates them to buy and use products more sustainably. Our essay highlights when this effect is strongest and exemplar cases alongside a cautionary counterexample, as well as a practical roadmap for deploying insight at scale

<sup>1</sup> The article ‘Activating the sustainable consumer: The role of customer involvement in corporate sustainability’ by Manuel Reppmann, Stephan Harms, Laura Marie Edinger-Schons, and Johann Nils Foege, featured in Volume 53, of *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* talks about how companies can encourage sustainable consumption behaviour among their customers by directly involving them in their corporate sustainability activities

## The spirit is willing, but...

Globally, 65% consumers claim they intend to buy eco-friendly products but as few as 26% really follow through.<sup>2</sup> Sustainable consumption is crucial to combating climate change, but consumers often don't act as sustainably as they intend. In India, 43% of consumers rank sustainability among their top buying criteria, yet sustainable goods hold just ~5% market share in key categories like packaged foods.<sup>3</sup>

Sustainable consumption is essential to combating climate change, yet consumers often fail to act in line with their stated intentions. The 'elusive green consumer' expresses a preference for environmentally friendly products, but their purchasing behaviour tells a different story. This intention-action gap continues to frustrate companies and policymakers alike.

The core issue is not a lack of positive intent, but a failure to activate it. Traditional marketing and CSR initiatives have tried to involve consumers with mixed success. What is frequently missing is a personal connection that transforms sustainability from a corporate mandate into a cause consumers feel invested in. Without this connection, even well-designed campaigns risk remaining superficial. This limitation points to the need to approach sustainability integration differently,

reframing it from a passive message ("please buy this eco-product") into an active, shared experience ("let's do this together").

Recent research by Reppmann, Professor of Sustainable Business at the University of Hamburg, and his colleagues supports this shift. Based on laboratory and field experiments with a fast-fashion retailer in the UK and Germany, they recommend involving consumers in the organisation's core sustainability initiatives to make them more active consumers of sustainable products. Rather than treating them as passive buyers, firms must engage customers as active partners in their sustainability journey.

## Customer involvement

Customer involvement extends beyond purchasing a 'green' product. It includes inviting consumers to contribute ideas for reducing waste, participate in recycling programs, or engage with sustainability-related operational changes. Such participation fosters *psychological ownership*, a feeling that states, "This sustainability initiative is mine, too." This shared ownership makes them more likely to align their [purchase decisions](#) and behaviours with the company's sustainability goals.<sup>4</sup>



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However, research shows that customer involvement is more impactful when a company's sustainability initiatives are tied to its core business rather than peripheral to it. A sustainability program embedded in the core product, service or operations is perceived as a genuine commitment and it encourages meaningful participation. For example, firms may redesign business processes, introduce new sustainable product lines or technologies, develop green supply chains or conduct life-cycle analysis to reduce energy use. In such cases, customers often become enthusiastic advocates and adjust their behaviours accordingly. Conversely, peripheral sustainability activities such as volunteering, sponsoring a highway, community development programs or philanthropic giving may generate goodwill, but yield a weaker response in meaningful buying behaviour.

The choice of sustainability activities determines the depth and quality of the company's customer interactions. When the core business is environmentally aligned, substantive information exchange and real experiences help consumers develop a sense of belonging. The perceived psychological ownership facilitates the journey from intent to action.

This mechanism is closely related to the 'IKEA effect', in which consumers develop a stronger emotional

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attachment to offerings they help create or assemble. As other [research](#) explains:<sup>5</sup>

“The practice of providing only limited customer service, as exemplified by the small sales staff in the IKEA shops, can be viewed as a core routine at IKEA, instrumental to making IKEA a cost leader in the industry. A few peripherals reinforce this core element, but core-extending routines, such as the practices to provide detailed ... catalogues as well as highly informative displays in the shops, and the custom to package even larger products in low-volume kits amenable to easy transport and self-assembly by customers.”

As a result, customers become more invested and aligned with IKEA's cost-leadership goal. In short, embedding sustainability into your core business and engaging customers in it produces the strongest results. Thus, it is essential to integrate sustainability into the main value proposition and provide ways for customers

to participate. This combination creates a virtuous cycle: customers' actions reinforce the company's goals, and their loyalty grows as they see themselves as part of the solution. Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic.

**Figure 1: Matrix of sustainability initiatives and customer involvement**

		Customer involvement in firms' sustainability initiatives	
		Not Involved	Involved
Centrality of sustainability initiatives (Relative to core business)	Core/Embedded (Integral to strategy)	<b>Passive Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers appreciate the company's sustainability efforts but remain observers</li> <li>Without personal involvement, most stick to old habits</li> <li>Intention–action gap only narrows slightly</li> </ul>	<b>Empowered Advocates</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feel high psychological ownership of the initiative; feel deeply invested</li> <li>High ownership drives significantly increased purchases of sustainable products</li> </ul>
	Peripheral (Outside core operations)	<b>Disengaged</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustainability remains a distant corporate effort with no customer engagement</li> <li>Customers feel no personal connection, and the initiative is perceived as PR with little or no effect on consumer choices</li> </ul>	<b>Loosely Coupled</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customers might participate out of goodwill (donating to a cause or attending an event) and gain positive feelings in return</li> <li>Any behavioural change is modest and short-lived</li> </ul>

Source: Developed by the authors based on Manuel Reppmann, Stephan Harms, Laura Marie Edinger-Schons, and Johann Nils Foege, "Activating the Sustainable Consumer: The Role of Customer Involvement in Corporate Sustainability." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 53, no. 2 (2025): 310–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01036-7>

### 3 cases of customer participation

Forward-thinking companies have begun actively involving customers in sustainability initiatives, with encouraging results. The following examples illustrate this approach.

- IKEA's furniture buy-back (global):** Furniture retailer IKEA is tapping into customer involvement to advance its circular economy goals. In many markets, IKEA now runs a buy-back program that allows customers to sell their used IKEA furniture for store credit. Returned items are then resold or recycled by IKEA. During a 2020 "Buy Back Friday" campaign, customers flocked to participate, and over **6,000 pieces** of furniture (around 60 tons) were returned in just six days in one country.<sup>6</sup> This outcome kept large amounts of material out of landfills. IKEA's initiative demonstrated that customers are willing to engage when given the chance and when sustainability is integrated into the core business.

- Zomato's cutlery opt-in (India):** In 2021, the food delivery platform Zomato changed its default setting to not include single-use plastic cutlery unless a customer explicitly requests it. This subtle design shift prompted conscious decision-making. Over 90% of users indicated they did not need cutlery. By turning it into an opt-in feature, Zomato empowered customers to prevent waste. The impact was significant: this change saves an estimated **5,000 kilograms** of plastic daily (nearly 2 million kg annually).<sup>7</sup> Restaurants benefitted from lower costs, while customers gained a sense of agency in preventing plastic waste by simply tapping the app.

- Patagonia's worn wear (global):** Outdoor apparel brand Patagonia has integrated customer involvement into its core business model through its **Worn Wear** program.<sup>8</sup> Customers can return used Patagonia clothing for store credit or have items repaired instead of replaced. Patagonia even provides free DIY repair guides and in-store repair services. Thus, Patagonia frames sustainability as a shared responsibility by actively promoting reuse and discouraging product overconsumption. The result: Patagonia's purpose-driven stance has fostered an almost cult-like loyalty.

### Sustainability minus engagement

Not every sustainability initiative delivers meaningful results, particularly when it is implemented superficially or without genuine customer engagement. A cautionary example comes from the fast-fashion industry. H&M launched a high-profile garment 'recycling' program called Close the Loop, inviting customers to drop off old clothes at H&M stores, promising to recycle them into new textiles. **Millions** of garments were collected under this initiative.<sup>9</sup>

However, because this effort remained a peripheral side project (while H&M's core business continued churning out fast fashion), it never truly involved customers in changing their consumption habits. Customers had no visibility or say in what happened after they donated their clothes. In fact, later investigations revealed that much of the collected clothing wasn't recycled as advertised. Instead, the company shipped **huge volumes** to developing countries, which ended up in landfills.<sup>10</sup> This revelation was seen by customers as greenwashing and undermined trust, underscoring the need for sustainability initiatives to be genuine, core-aligned and transparent.

### Implementation considerations

Engaging customers in sustainability does not require a large budget. It can begin with simple, deliberate steps

such as identifying a sustainability goal that aligns with the core business and launching a modest pilot initiative. To signal authenticity, the initiative should be integrated into core operations and supported across marketing, operations, and customer service.






Digital tools can play a critical role by inviting participation, capturing data, and communicating outcomes. Sharing tangible results—for example, “You helped us recycle five tons of material this quarter”—reinforces the customer’s sense of contribution. Transparency at each stage is essential, as visible progress builds trust and sustains engagement.

## Plan as an integrated process

To deepen customer involvement in an organisation’s sustainable products and services, consider the five steps outlined in *Figure 2*.



**Figure 2: Consumer involvement process**

Audit and prioritise	Design a pilot	Enable employees, invite customers	Monitor and learn	Scale and integrate
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review sustainability initiatives and identify which ones are core to the business</li> <li>Focus on one or two high-impact areas, such as recycling or product design</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Craft a simple pilot with clear goals and an easy way for customers to participate and receive feedback</li> <li>Keep it small and focused to learn what works</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launch the pilot with an invitation explaining why it matters and how to get involved</li> <li>Train the frontline team to encourage and assist customers</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track participation and results, gather feedback and adjust as needed.</li> <li>Celebrate early successes to keep customers and employees motivated</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the pilot succeeds, fold it into regular operations and gradually extend it to reach more customers and sustainability goals</li> <li>Work toward a culture where sustainability feels like a shared mission</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by the authors

## Bridging the gap

The insights and our examples of effective sales of sustainable products suggest a clear path to bridging the intention-behaviour gap. The true problem lies not with the customer but in the fact that many sustainability initiatives leave consumers in a state of passive support. The participation matrix clarifies this distinction: peripheral initiatives may generate goodwill, but only

meaningful customer participation in sustainability efforts in the core business can translate purchase intent into action. The path forward can begin modestly with one initiative and one customer group, but the payoff is substantial. Firms that move customers into active participation achieve stronger environmental outcomes, deeper loyalty and a more credible role as forces for good.

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