

HEALTH AND BEAUTY DEPARTMENT TARGETS PLASTIC WASTE

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By Christopher Cox

First the bad news: Almost none of the plastic that you put in the recycling bin gets recycled. A recent report from Bennington College puts the percentage of plastic waste that's actually reused at five to six percent, a number that has declined steadily ever since China and other overseas markets announced that they would no longer accept plastic from the United States. Most of the plastic sent to recycling centers now ends up in landfills or is sent to kilns to be burned. Attempts to fix the problem bump against the hard reality that new plastic is too cheap to make recycling old plastic economical, and the small amount that is recycled is too toxic to be used for food containers. In the meantime, our consumption of plastic only increases, by roughly 15% a year. In 2018, according to the EPA, the average person produced 218 pounds of plastic waste.



Now the good news: Environmentally conscious companies are aware of the problem, and they are seeking to fix it by reducing the amount of plastic that winds up in our products in the first place. “Companies do know that long-term, the future is going to be not plastic-free, but hopefully a little less plastic,” said Alexander Walsh, the Coop’s health and beauty buyer. “They’re realizing that there’s a consumer base that is interested in that.”

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Starting this April 22—Earth Day—the Coop will be building awareness about items in the health and beauty aisle that have minimal, if any, plastic. The idea was born out of a conversation between Walsh, Receiving Coordinator Karen Martin, and Jessica

Wey, a new member who works the six a.m. shift stocking health and beauty shelves. The goal, Wey said, is to “bring some more awareness to these plastic-free items and how you can swap things out in your routine to potentially make a difference.”

The campaign is still being formulated, but Wey, who works in healthcare advertising, said that some options include highlighting plastic-free products on social media and in testimonials in the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. There could be special end caps (as the shelves at the end of each aisle are known) with low-plastic products, and signs in aisle six to point to items with the smallest ecological footprint. The goal is to nudge shoppers toward reducing the amount of plastic they take home.

Wey underscored the importance and potential impact of this awareness campaign: “It’s so crowded on the shopping floor that sometimes the best user experience is to just go and get what you need and get in and out,” she said. “There’s not a lot of room for discovery. I think that a lot of members would be open to buying new products or going for an eco-friendly option, but they just don’t know about it.”

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ALEXANDER WALSH, HEALTH AND BEAUTY BUYER FOR THE COOP

Health and beauty is one of the most plastic-dependent departments of the Coop, Walsh told me. He cited the example of Everyone 3-in-1 Soap. The Coop sells about 3,000 of the 32-ounce bottles a year, all most likely bound for a landfill even if they are initially shipped to a recycler. If the Coop could replace those bottles with bar soap, which usually comes wrapped in cardboard or paper, it would eliminate that much plastic waste.



Indeed, one of Walsh's biggest successes in cutting down the amount of plastic coming into the Coop involves shampoo. A few years ago, a member asked if the Coop could start carrying HiBAR products, including their "salon grade" shampoo and conditioner bars, which come in a cardboard package. The product wasn't available on the East Coast, so Walsh contacted the company and they began shipping bars directly to the Coop. Once the product began selling well here in Brooklyn, the company was able to show those numbers to United Natural Foods (also known as Unfi) one of the Coop's most important distributors. HiBAR was able to expand to the East Coast and is now distributed nationwide. "We helped them prove they had a viable product," Walsh said.



Walsh has continued to push for low-plastic and plastic-free options whenever he can find them. One example is Dr. Tung's dental floss. Walsh noticed that Dr. Tung's had a version of its floss that came in a cardboard rather than plastic dispenser, and he emailed the company to see if it sold its popular Smart Floss variety with that kind of packaging. The company didn't respond, but a few months later, Dr. Tung's began to send Smart Floss in a cardboard dispenser. Sales of the floss increased.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN DIAZ

The campaign will highlight these and other low-plastic items, including a new version of HiBAR deodorant—a Coop favorite—that comes in a cardboard tube that functions like a push-up popsicle. “You might not think that it’s a big deal having a bar shampoo or a cardboard deodorant,” Walsh said, “but there are a number of members that have wanted to hug me and think it’s a huge deal.” He and Wey expect to continue their efforts to raise awareness through July, to support the broader effort known as Plastic-Free July.

The message is clear: the best way to eliminate plastic waste is to produce less of it in the first place. That means worrying less about what goes in the blue bin and focusing your buying power instead on items packaged in cardboard, paper, metal, or glass. “I’m a huge fan of recycling,” Walsh said, “but it’s also fairly important for Coop members to have their eyes open and make decisions more based on reality than a hope or a dream.”

Christopher Cox’s book The Deadline Effect is out now in paperback.