

# Starbucks Is Trashing Its Green Image

By SARAH GILBERT 9:00 AM 04/22/10

A shareholder resolution at Starbucks' (SBUX) annual meeting was defeated so soundly, its backer shuddered a bit when the vote was announced. No, the company wouldn't be adopting a comprehensive recycling plan -- only 11% of shareholders voted in favor.

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.

As You Sow, a foundation that advocates corporate accountability for environmental and hazardous waste issues, brought up the Starbucks recycling proposal at the shareholder meeting. It believes that 11% support, while small, is basis for hope and says it will continue to push the issue, as it has with PepsiCo (PEP), Coca-Cola (KO) and Nestle.

## Billions and Billions Trashed

The advocacy group says that, in the U.S. in 2009, "over 200 billion beverage containers were sold, and over 130 billion of those containers ended up in landfills or were incinerated," mourning the declining recycling rates for beverage containers in this country, "from 54% in 1992 to less than 33%" in 2009.

This may be largely due to a change in the mix of beverage containers; while it has long been automatic for many children of the 60s, 70s and 80s to recycle their aluminum cans and glass bottles, in the late 90s the rise of plastic bottles, bottled water, and the paper and plastic cups of Starbucks and fast-food chains muddied the issue. No longer could you neatly make bins for cans, bottles and the rest of the trash. And most municipalities still, today, do not have recycling programs for plastic "to-go" cups, and most paper cups aren't recyclable or compostable because they aren't purely paper-made anymore.

Starbucks insists that its own plans are enough, for now. In order to address the problem of the paper cups -- which are now made with a thin plastic lining that cannot

be recycled (but in my experience breaks down to a wispy bit in a nice hot compost bin) -- the company has promised to make them recyclable by 2012.

### **Seriously, Don't Rush or Anything**

In addition, says the coffee chain, it will "have recycling available in all of our stores where we control waste collection and serve 25% of beverages in reusable cups" by 2015. Most recently, the company ballyhooed its move to offer 10-cent discounts for customers who bring their own cup, a boon for customers like me who carry a reusable coffee thermos everywhere and ask for a "for here" cup whenever we plan to drink it in the store.

The problems with these solutions are legion. First and most limiting, there are very, very few customers like me. Even in a self-consciously "Green" city like Portland, Oregon, where I live, I rarely see another customer toting her own cup, and when I ask for a ceramic mug, it's an unusual enough occurrence that sometimes I must ask twice. The reach for a paper cup is automatic. As an experiment, I sat in my nearest Starbucks outlet on a Sunday morning and watched 50 transactions over a half-hour; only one of the customers brought her own mug (I recognized her as an off-duty Starbucks employee) and none of them asked for a "for here" container.

### **Heroic Tales of Starbucks Employees**

The second problem, for Starbucks management, is the limited municipal and building support for recycling and composting programs. Even in those cities and towns that offer curbside pickup of a wide range of recyclable materials, building management must support it and, many partners complain, strip mall and retail complex management companies often don't provide such a service.

Heroic tales of Starbucks employees who bring home bottles, newspapers and hot drink sleeves to recycle in their own bins abound. Starbucks Director of Environmental Impact Jim Hanna sums it up: "In addition to working with local municipal governments, materials suppliers and cup manufacturers to improve recycling infrastructures, we believe in harnessing the creativity of environmentally conscious individuals to identify new alternatives."

Sadly, right now the creativity is being harnessed off the clock and against company "we're doing enough" policy.

### **"Not Even Green 101"**

The third problem is that employees never ask the question, "Will that be for here or to go?" The disposable is assumed. As San Francisco blog The Thin Green Line says, this, along with making recycled paper and compost bins available in stores, "isn't even Green 101, it's green for middle schoolers." In fact, it's such basic green action that my husband (the one who most often drags his feet behind my charge-ahead green activism) has for

more than a decade been asking anyone who'd listen why Starbucks doesn't offer recycle bins.

In Portland, where my husband and I kvetch about such things, the municipal support is here. The Trader Joe's a block away from our neighborhood Starbucks has compost bins in its bathrooms for paper towels. The Burgerville fast food chain where we get our french fry fix has switched to compostable beverage cups and utensils. It's rare to walk into a store that doesn't have clearly marked bins for busing, food waste, newspapers and glass bottles.

### **Starbucks, Starbucks -- Trash -- Everywhere**

And everywhere I walk, bike and publicly transport, there are Starbucks cups. They are in the lilac bushes and the Oregon grapes, the mud puddles and the overflowing public trash cans, the door jambs and bus benches. I have begun a series of photos of Starbucks cups left on "walk" signal buttons. For a company that presents itself as sustainable, the brand-name waste is in your face.

The fourth and worst problem is that very few options exist to recycle plastic beverage cups or paper cups that have been soiled with foods or beverages. Generally, they're just not recyclable no matter how many little cheery triangle symbols manufacturers put on the bottom. Most municipalities, even Portland, won't take them at all, and compostable options require a messy infrastructure.

### **So Easy, Even a Kindergartener Could Co It**

Starbucks should do more. Starbucks could do more, quite easily. As The Thin Green Line's Cameron Scott writes of the company's plan to get recycling bins in all its stores, "Why they think it will take five years to do what kindergartners around the world already do every day, I can't say."

The company chooses not to set any standards for how much of its waste will get recycled, probably, because any such standards would have to be insultingly low as a percentage of overall waste. No one will take out Starbucks' trash to any place other than a landfill; and that's just not good enough.