

Sustainability at the time of COVID-19

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Abstract

The pandemic is affecting sustainability in cosmetics in a variety of ways, in different parts of the world, including disruption to the supply chains. Despite the disruption there are growing sustainability related trends in finished products and initiatives by retailers to help conscious consumers navigating the complex decision making process and also the recycling process. At an industry level there are also very interesting initiatives for packaging and ingredients that could hold the keys to future sustainable innovation.

Keywords

- Sustainability
- COVID19
- Waste free cosmetics
- Water free cosmetics
- Certifications for sustainability
- Retailers sustainability initiatives

With COVID19, everything and everyone has been affected, this includes the sustainability trend, and the aspiration to find the sweet spot among people, planet, and profit. Despite the disruption and human losses, some good things have happened sustainability wise.

For the first time in many years we have seen the reduction of greenhouse gases. There has been more space for wildlife to populate as humans have been "locked up". Families have had the opportunity to spend much more time together and local communities have been contributing with donations to food banks and volunteers.

However, there has also been a spike in plastic waste, caused by the priority for hygiene and the use of PPE.

The impact of COVID19 has been disruptive for the economy and the way we spend money, to the point that some believe that financial concerns will slow down the sustainability trend. I believe the opposite to this, as the COVID19 pandemic is turning into a catalyst for change, pushing us towards sustainable practises and products. Because of COVID19 worries and restrictions, people have also become more health aware and in touch with what happens around them, and they have been appreciating their natural surroundings and its positive effects on their wellbeing, highlighting what is really important in life, and this shifts the priority of our values more towards being in harmony with nature and ourselves.

A global consumer survey done by Accenture in April 2020 supports this belief, with 60% of consumers reporting spending more time on physical and mental self-care, 50% shopping more health-consciously and 45% who are making more sustainable choices with their shopping. This shows that consumers do not just think about their own good but are also making choices for the greater good.

Here are areas where I see and expect the biggest impact for sustainability related matters for the cosmetic industry.

PACKAGING, PACKAGING, PACKAGING

The explosion of hygiene related products has generally been good for the cosmetic industry, but it makes us face the reality that we need new packaging solutions and new models.

This need has pushed innovation in two directions, one run by bigger companies and the other run by SMEs. The solution model of big companies is based on tools and sustainability metrics to help the decision-making process. How does a glass jar compare with a recycled plastic bottle or an Aluminium container, and which is most sustainable? SPICE (or the sustainable packaging initiative for cosmetics) can help you finding the answer to these kinds of questions. Compiled by L'Oreal and Quantis, this platform is open to corporate members (cosmetic products manufacturers and packaging suppliers) and associated members (NGOs, academic partners and so on). SPICE allows the handling of many parameters such as CO2 emissions, water consumption and planetary boundary weighting factors (ozone depletion, human toxicity, land use, to name just a three) to end up with a score for different packaging solutions to allow comparison. This is quite an impressive tool, incorporating complex environmental parameters from birth until death and ending up with one simple score. A recent example of this commitment is L'Oreal's Elvive launch with a 100% recycled plastic bottle, which is claimed to save 7,000 tonnes of plastic every year (1).

The other approach is to reduce packaging impact by using solid cosmetics (without primary containers), something which gives the consumer *an experience* of making a difference at reducing plastic waste. Of late, I have seen quite a few Indie beauty brands launching these simply made solid cosmetics, from body wash to solid shampoos and conditioners, and the range is widening. This movement for solid cosmetics, even if still niche at this time, will keep growing, especially with younger consumers whose environmental values are strong.

On the other side of the ocean, Johnson & Johnson has launched its Healthy Lives mission and has committed to invest 800 million USD to improve the health of people and planet (2). This includes a commitment to use 100% recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging by 2025 and to eliminate polystyrene and black plastic containers by 2022.

In the UK, Boots, the health and beauty retailer, has partnered with Scan2recycle and has launched a new platform to boost recycling by rewarding consumers with Advantage Card points if they recycle in store any empty container from any beauty brand (3).

WATER, MY PRECIOUS

The recent fires in California have not only left terrible devastation but have also made us more aware of water shortage issues in many parts of the world, including wealthy areas. There has been a rise in demand for water free cosmetics, either in a powder or tablet form. In addition to using less packaging, these products also give the benefit of lasting a long time (the absence of water reduces the chances of instability issues in the product), and require much less preservative, therefore they can be milder, and are lighter to ship in comparison to conventional products. A nice example of this trend is the moon dust shampoo by OWA Haircare, where one bottle equates to four standard shampoo bottles.

COSMETIC PRESERVATION FOR SENSITIVE SKIN

Hygiene is today's focus in the consumers, it being so related to safety. However, for all sorts of reasons, from stress to cleaning more often than usual, skin reactions have also become more common, feeding a need for extra mildness. This means that the industry now faces the challenge of providing effective yet mild preservation as people's skin is becoming more sensitive. Some believe that this need might lead to a revival of parabens. I believe that this challenge will lead to using lower preservative levels combined with multifunctional cosmetic ingredients or using only multifunctional ingredients for full microbial protection. As preservation is quite a complex art, but yet so vital to safe and effective cosmetics, I am writing a handbook on this very topic, as an introduction to the ingredients available to the cosmetic formulators. Please check my website for further information.

SUPPLY CHAIN AND UPCYCLING

With the recent disruption of supply for all sorts of goods, we have all been wondering and become more aware about where the stuff we buy comes from in the first place. Ingredients coming from Covidly badly hit areas have had serious supply issues, which has resulted in dramatic price increases. In an interview I did in the middle of the pandemic with Angeline Rocherieux, the manager and CSR activator at Laboratoire Expanscience, she stated that they were working on solidifying and growing their local supply chains in France and Peru' (4).

Using food waste as a resource for new cosmetic applications is also very much a growing trend. More raw materials are being promoted that originate in food waste. In a recent interview I did with Dr Francesca Sansone, a researcher at Salerno University in Italy who is working on developing extracts from food waste, she shared some amazing findings from chestnut spiny burs (ricci di castagna), something that is usually burnt as waste. The spiny bur extract is antioxidant as well as antimicrobial and they have been exploring its applications not only in cosmetics but also its use in packaging as a natural fungicide (5).

MOVING TOWARDS RESPONSIBLY SOURCED CARBON

Who knows how much oil or petroleum we have left on the planet? We do not have an answer for that and so we need a long-term plan. In September 2020 the Renewable Carbon Initiative was launched. This was to promote responsible Carbon initiatives to support and speed up the transition from a linear economy, based on non-renewable fossil fuels, to a circular economy based on renewable Carbon. Behind this great initiative

there are eleven leading companies such as Henkel, Covestro, Beiersdorf, Unilever etc., who are advocates of the concept that we need a chemistry based on responsibly sourced Carbon, rather than avoiding Carbon all together. It will be very interesting to see what comes out of this new and exciting partnership.

COMPLEXITY TAKEN CARE BY RETAILERS AND CERTIFICATIONS

If you think that sustainability is too complex for the consumer to understand, then think again. Amazon has just launched the climate pledge friendly program to help consumers find more sustainable products. The requirement to be part of this pledge is to have one, or more, of the nineteen certifications listed, such as Fair Trade, FSC, Green Seal, CradletoCradle, Energy Star etc. (6). The Soil Association Organic Beauty and Wellbeing Market report for 2020 shares growth figures but also the interesting insight from a consumer survey that says that "sustainable" is the key word people associate with organic in over 52% of respondents. Therefore, even if there is a great variety of certifications, which can cause confusion with consumers, certifications still have a role to play in facilitating conscious consumerism based on a third-party validation.

THE FUTURE IS SUSTAINABLE AND SAFE

Despite these uncertain times, and the disruption caused by COVID19, sustainability is still evolving strong, with exciting partnerships and trends that will improve the sustainability profile of how we develop and manufacture products now and in the future to come. Even if consumers have safety in high regard as a result of COVID19, they are also becoming more aware of environmental challenges and wish to make a difference with the way they spend their money.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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