

Consumers Have The Power To Change The Recycling Narrative



It is hard to know who the good and bad guys are in the war on waste but QUT Business School Associate Professor Gary Mortimer said consumers have the power to drive change if they think it is important enough.

Pete Wadewitz, national chairman of Australian Organic Recycling Association, agrees. "There is not a lot known about our industry. We are like the quiet achievers working with organic recycling businesses to create new products and effect change," he said.

"But the challenge we come up against is convincing the powers to be we have viable long-term solutions that is not going to cost them the earth and will create a valuable circular economy, which is a win win.

"It is vital consumers understand how important their role is in driving this change. By knowing more about the circular economy and how much more businesses and government can be doing to make sure our organic waste is used to its best ability."

The problem is the consumer has no idea about the impact of their choices. Professor Mortimer said this is driven by their desire to have the freshest produce that is always in season and looks good. "Shoppers expect supermarkets to be brimming with the freshest produce. They want products out of season – apples and grapes all year round – even though there is a season for these foods," he said.

"Supermarkets have felt the need to provide an endless array of food types. Food has to be the freshest and be pleasing to the eye and otherwise consumers are unwilling to purchase it."

What happens to the food they don't purchase? There is not a lot of transparency around food waste in the supply chain so there are no stats on in-store wastage. However, it is estimated 25% of food waste is sent to landfill by large supermarkets.

For most supermarkets, food waste is thrown into one bin, making it almost impossible to create a range of finished products like pet food, biogas, other food products, compost, and livestock feed.

Professor Mortimer said supermarkets are gradually seeing the value of feeding into the circular economy. "Woolworths in Sydney is leading the way. Stores have four or five bins lined up, breaking down waste into green waste, cardboard, meat products, and bread and bakery," he said.

"But shoppers are not aware of this because it all happens behind the scenes."

Mr Wadewitz, from AORA, said for retailers and government to change strategies, it comes back to the consumer. "If we want to change legislation and rules, the consumers have got to be the ones to drive it and to see the importance in changing how we recycle organic waste.

"We cannot sustain this current level of food waste. Consumers need to be part of the conversation about how the waste is or isn't used," he said.

"We know Australians want to recycle. They are happy to buy goods that are derived from recycled goods. But if they are not aware of the options available or see the value in the circular economy, nothing will change because the power of the people is effective in getting government to change their attitudes and actions.

"The backflip by Ipswich City Council is a case in point. The social media backlash was so powerful the council backed away from their decision to scrap recycling."

Professor Mortimer agrees. "Consumers can and do drive government behaviour," he said. "But they need more facts and figures on the waste issue."

The Australian Organic Recycling Association's conference this week will help drive more conversations about an industry that is working to change government policy and be given a seat at the table.

www.aora.org.au

Contacts

Annette Densham

0478718041

mailto: annette@publicitygenie.com