

Environmental Impact of Cosmetics: Consumers Hold the Key

The cosmetics industry is focusing on green formulations, resource-efficiency and packaging to reduce environmental impacts. However, there is growing evidence that such measures have little effect on the overall environmental footprint of cosmetic products. A number of life-cycle analysis studies show that the highest environmental impact of cosmetic products is at the consumer level.

As will be shown in New York at the Sustainable Cosmetics Summit (www.sustainablecosmeticssummit.com) on May 16-18, companies will need to address the environmental consequences of consumption if they are to significantly reduce their ecological footprints. For instance, one study shows that 94% of the carbon footprint of a shampoo is at the consumer level; small changes in water temperature during an average wash can significantly reduce the overall environmental impact of the product.

SGS will present its latest life-cycle analysis findings on environmental footprints at the New York summit. It will be shown that after consumption, the highest environmental impact of cosmetics is from raw materials and packaging. Although there is a growing trend to use raw materials from renewable sources, such ingredients can have complex footprints because of differences in extraction and processing techniques.

According to the summit organizer Organic Monitor, sustainable purchasing and responsible consumption are the way forward. Cosmetic companies need to engage consumers for positive change if they are to make a sustainable difference. Re-formulating products with green ingredients, using fewer resources and eco-design are only part of the solution. The major challenge however is changing consumer behavior.

Research shows lack of choices, high prices and perceived quality of green cosmetics are major barriers to sustainable purchases. The high incidence of greenwashing in the cosmetics industry also undermines companies' efforts to influence consumer behavior. On the positive side, advances in mobile communications provide an opportunity for brands to engage consumers for positive change. Social media in particular improves transparency and encourages two-way dialogue between brands and consumers.

Many large cosmetic companies, including Procter & Gamble and L'Oreal, have made commitments to reduce their environmental footprints whilst significantly expanding their business in the coming years. Much of this business growth will be in developing countries. According to the OECD, the global middle-class will expand from 2 billion to 5 billion by 2030. This increase will mainly be in developing countries where consumers aspire towards western lifestyles characterized by conspicuous consumption and intense resource use. Without addressing consumer behavior, it is likely that lofty corporate goals to become more sustainable will not be met.

The environmental impact of cosmetics, green consumer behavior, and methods to encourage sustainable purchases and responsible consumption will be featured in the upcoming Sustainable Cosmetics Summit (May 16-18, New York).

About the Sustainable Cosmetics Summit

The aim of the Sustainable Cosmetics Summit is to encourage sustainability in the beauty industry by bringing together key stake-holders and debate major sustainability issues in a high-level forum. The North American edition will take place at InterContinental New York Barclay hotel on 16-18th May 2013. More information is available from www.sustainablecosmeticssummit.com.

About Organic Monitor

Organic Monitor is a London-based specialist research, consulting & training company that focuses on the global organic & related product industries. Since 2001, we have been providing a range of business services to operators in high-growth ethical & sustainable industries. Our services include market research publications, business & technical consulting, seminars & workshops, and sustainability summits. Visit us at www.organicmonitor.com.

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