

NATURES ORGANICS

For many brands, changing the look of a product is usually a marketing strategy. However, when Natures Organics redesigned the bottles of its Organic Care range in early 2019 the purpose was entirely environmental.

The Melbourne-based manufacturer had discovered that the coloured, dark or black plastics in their plant-based hair and skin care products were more difficult for scanners in recycling plants to detect, so were at risk of being lost to landfill.

'As much as consumers seem to like dark or coloured bottles, where possible, we have stripped out the pigments and moved to clear bottles - that way we know they won't be rejected from the recycling stream,' says Nancy Clay, Commercial Manager of Natures Organics.

This latest modification was just another step along a sometimes unpredictable road to more sustainable packaging, she says.

Natures Organics uses pellets of Australian recycled waste plastics to mould and blow all the bottles for its nine brands of liquid products.

Nowadays, nearly all of the 43 million bottles the company produces a year, across a range of 130 products, are made from 100% recycled plastic - and every bottle is 100% recyclable.

'We call it bottles from bottles - which is very important in a sector that still relies heavily on bottles and containers made from virgin plastic derived from petroleum,' says Ms Clay.

Although Natures Organics launched back in 1981 with a focus on plant-based ingredients, it is only recently that the company has been able to match the sustainability of its packaging with its natural products, in line with its original environmental goals.

Having already exceeded the 2025 National Packaging Targets on recyclability and recycled content, Natures Organics is now keen to encourage more businesses to follow suit, and to use the resources and networks APCO can provide to assist.



'Many consumers want plastic free options. Unfortunately, in our space (liquid personal and home care products) that is not easy or practical to implement,' says Nancy Clay, Commercial Manager of Natures Organics.'

Plastics – no longer so fantastic

Natures Organics is well aware that the relationship between consumers and plastic is souring. However, plastic is ideal for liquid products – and has many advantages over alternative such as glass and metal in terms of price, flexibility, weight and durability. This presents businesses with a conundrum.

'I think the push back from Australian



consumers today is that they don't want plastic at all - especially after seeing the War on Waste (series on ABC). Many consumers want plastic free options.'

'Unfortunately, in our space that is not easy or practical to implement,' she says.

While consideration is being given towards plastic free packaging, it's the circular economy model that currently offers the best solutions, she says.

However, without greater demand for recycled plastic pellets there won't be more investment in the recycling infrastructure that's needed to boost resource recovery in Australia. So companies need to help drive demand for recycled materials every step of the way, she says.

The winding road to 'bottles from bottles'

Nature Organics began using recycled plastics about 10 years ago, when recycled plastics pellets were difficult and expensive to source. It has been a steep learning curve.

For a start, virgin plastic stock could not just be swapped out for recycled plastic pellets. Technical modifications were required at the company's plant. These proved successful in enabling the company to produce 100% recycled PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles for the majority of their products.

However, new technical challenges arose when Nature Organics produced large bottles requiring handles for their laundry liquids made from 50% HDPE (high density polyethylene). The bottles split, deformed or failed. What the company discovered was that some virgin HDPE plastic is still required. Currently HDPE bottles use a 50:50 mix.

Then there was the challenges of price and supply. It was not until 2016, says Ms Clay, that a steady supply of pellets was available in Australia. Yet that came at an additional cost of about 15% more than virgin plastics.

More recently, the rapid emergence of compostable bioplastics on the Australian and global market seemed like an attractive alternative to petroleum-based plastics.

As a company that distinguishes itself in the market as a plant-based range of brands and products, these corn-based plastics appeared compatible with the company's environmental ethos.

It was worth pursuing, says Ms Clay. However, the company's first compostable plant-based containers immediately hit two hurdles. First, the current generation of bioplastics must be

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composted in industrial facilities at temperature of at least 60° C and high humidity, which were not available in Australia. And, second, if they were mixed in with conventional waste plastics they were not benign. Compostable bioplastics could contaminate entire batches of potentially recyclable plastics creating an unintended negative environmental impact.

'It's hard to distinguish between the bioplastic waste bottles and conventional waste plastics, I think both consumers and recyclers were confused,' she says.

So, bioplastics were shelved for now and Natures Organics went back to recycled plastic pellets.

Today, the company buys only pellets of recycled plastic waste that have been processed onshore.

Natures Organics currently uses its own logos to identify its bottles as made from recycled plastics. The upcoming extension of APCO's Australasian Recycling Label (ARL) to include the recycled content of packaging will align well with its business model.

'We are currently benefiting from the ARL (to direct consumers to correctly recycle bottles) and APCO's assistance in ensuring the correct on pack logos are used.'

Don't forget to clean up your own backyard

Ms Clay also believes there are big opportunities for businesses to reduce their waste footprint by taking a critical look at their internal operations. At Natures Organics, that included looking for recycling solutions for everything from bulk packaging like drums, wooden pallets and shrink wrap to the rubbish in the staff lunchroom.

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Businesses should not only look at their packaging, but at their own sites.'

'It's true that every little bit helps, however businesses have to go further,' she says of the global waste challenge.

And, while plastics are not infinitely recyclable, the environmental returns are considerable. Every used bottle that makes its way into the recycling stream can be reprocessed ten times, avoiding the production of ten virgin plastic bottles.

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