



# Sustainability is Everyone's Business

Consumer Insights on  
Six Leading Industries



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# Introduction:

## Investing in Sustainability

Sustainability has been a hot topic for years, but lately it feels like we're talking about it more than ever before. From the policy promises of the Green New Deal to the social satire of *Don't Look Up*, environmental concerns have taken center stage in politics and culture. And as Gen Z — which [Forbes](#) dubbed "the sustainability generation" — continues to grow in buying power, it's only going to become more important for brands to keep up.

But oftentimes, there's a gap between what we practice and what we preach — both on the brand side and the consumer side. Whether due to the cost, the effort, or the lack of availability, consumers and brands alike are failing to live up to their stated goals of sustainable living.

For brands, it begs the question: how much investment should you pour into sustainability initiatives when consumers are at this crossroads? Is the higher cost of materials a barrier, or should brands worry less about the cost and more about getting ahead before the tide turns towards sustainability for good?

These are just some of the questions Suzy set out to answer. In March, we ran a series of surveys asking more than 1,000 Americans for their thoughts on sustainability in their personal lives, as well as how they viewed companies' approaches to sustainable business.

We focused on six key industries at the forefront of sustainability innovation: CPG, automotive, consumer electronics and technology, food and beverage, retail and fast fashion, and hemp and cannabis. Each industry faces unique challenges to go green, and we wanted to get a sense of how their ideas and actions are resonating with consumers. In our surveys, we weighted our results to accurately reflect the age, ethnicity, and gender makeup of the US population.

In this whitepaper, we explore how each of these industries approach sustainability — both what they're saying and what they're doing — as well as how consumers are responding to those approaches. What do consumers really think about brands' sustainability initiatives — and do their beliefs actually have implications on their purchase behavior?

# The Consumer Lens

## Behaviors vs. Belief

Generally, most Americans do believe in the basic idea of sustainability. **The majority said they feel a sense of responsibility to look after the planet**, but only 38% said they felt they were actively making a difference. Another 20% said they're just not sure what they can do, and 18% said they felt guilty because they know they can do more.

When asked to name the top three things holding them back from doing more for sustainability, respondents said cost (36%), lack of understanding (33%) and lack of resources (27%) were the biggest factors. So, while it's easy to attribute the difference in consumers' stated beliefs versus their actual behavior to hypocrisy, the reality is that all these add up. **But what about the behaviors people do engage in?**

62%



When asked what sustainability behaviors they engage in **62% of our respondents said they recycle**, followed by 51% donating used items, and 49% saving water

But even for the most popular option – recycling – there are significant barriers. For example, after China stopped accepting shipments of US recyclables in 2018, many municipalities were forced to end their curbside recycling programs and close recycling drop-off centers, [according to Waste Dive](#). That lack of infrastructure shows up in responses to our survey.

54%



Those that don't recycle mostly cited **lack of availability (54%)** and resources (49%). Others felt that it took too much effort (39%) or that they lacked knowledge (38%)

There are countless factors holding consumers back from living more sustainably – but that also means there are plenty of opportunities for brands to help fill that gap. And brands don't need to match PepsiCo's [\\$35 million investment](#) in recycling infrastructure to make a difference.

62%



**62% said providing drop off-locations would make it easier for them to recycle**, along with offering incentive programs like store credit (60%), and explaining how to recycle on their packaging (57%)

# The Brand Lens:

## Actionable Steps

But before making any massive investments, one major question looms: how much do consumers actually expect from brands? According to our survey, **most consumers believe sustainability is everyone's problem – but businesses take on just a tad more responsibility.** From most to least responsibility, our respondents ranked corporations and businesses (68%), individuals (65%), and governments (63%), with only 12% saying no one was responsible.

While only 46% felt brands were actually trying to make a difference and 58% felt brands were just trying to reach eco-friendly consumers, that didn't stop consumers from expecting brands to be sustainable. More than half (57%) said it was necessary that brands follow sustainable business practices.

### What do consumers want brands to **say**?

Information is the key to communication, according to our survey.

#### **1 Be truly honest and open about how sustainable they are**

55% of our respondents said they wanted to see this, making it the most popular option. Consumers are wary of companies "greenwashing," or making their products sound more environmentally friendly than they really are.

#### **2 Educate people on sustainable issues**

39% of consumers wanted this from brands. Remember, a third of respondents also said a lack of knowledge prevents them from doing more for sustainability, so filling the knowledge gap is highly valued by consumers.

#### **3 Tell consumers about their sustainability initiatives**

Another 39% said this. Don't make your customers do the digging themselves!

### What do consumers want brands to **do**?

In other words, how to put your money where your mouth is.

#### **1 Use sustainable materials in their products**

40% of consumers wanted to see this. This can mean anything from biodegradable packaging to organic ingredients in CPG products.

#### **2 Reduce their packaging.**

38% said this was a top-three need from brands. Given how difficult recycling can be for many Americans, simply reducing the amount of packaging means less waste, even when recycling isn't an option.

#### **3 Treat workers fairly**

34% said this was important. Oftentimes, environmental sustainability and worker treatment go hand in hand – both things put the human factor ahead of profits at any cost. [The Fair Trade certification](#), for example, has minimum standards for both environmental practices and labor practices.

Of course, the exact steps brands can take vary by industry.

In the next sections, we take a deep dive into top industries for more targeted insights.



# Industry Deep Dive:

## Consumer Packaged Goods

CPG is one of the industries with the most visible connection to sustainability. After all, once a consumer is done using a product, they have to reckon with the packaging that's left behind — and there's a lot of it. Globally, we produce more than 300 million tons of plastic waste every year, which is about the same as the weight of the entire human population, per the [UN Environment Programme](#).

As environmental concerns grow, sustainable business practices aren't just a nice-to-have for the CPG industry — it's increasingly becoming the standard.

Nearly half (44%) of respondents to our survey said they already use reusable products instead of single-use plastics, and nearly two thirds (64%) said they were willing to make the swap to more sustainable products.

However, there's currently a gap in what consumers want and what's offered. For example, 56% of our respondents said they were more likely to use a beauty product if the brand had an associated recycling program for the packaging — but about the same amount (59%) said they struggled to find personal care brands with sustainable business practices.



### What are CPG brands doing?

The 25 largest global CPG companies, from Nestlé to Procter & Gamble to Coca-Cola, have committed to either introducing recyclable packaging, minimizing packaging altogether, or reusing material, according to the [Consumer Brands Association](#). 80% of those are working toward fully recyclable packaging for all their products by 2030.

Through the [“Every Bottle Back” initiative](#), Pepsi is partnering with Coca-Cola and Keurig Dr Pepper to expand curbside recycling in major US cities to reclaim plastic bottles. [Unilever](#) has launched refill pilot programs, introducing options for consumers to refill products at home and in-store. Nestlé is rolling out recyclable paper packaging for some of its iconic brands, like Smarties and Nesquik.

### What else can CPG brands do?

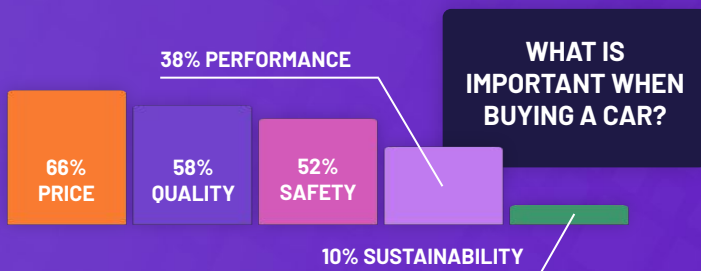
There were multiple steps that consumers would like to see brands take. About half (49%) of our respondents wanted to see brands offer recycling programs for packaging, but offering refill programs (52%) and using plastic-free packaging (48%) was just as popular.

With US recycling programs still struggling after China's 2018 ban on US recycling imports, choosing to go the route of refillable or compostable packaging is becoming more popular. The global reusable packaging market is expected to grow from \$78.4 billion in 2020 to \$112.3 billion by 2027, according to [ReportLinker](#). Meanwhile, [Research and Markets](#) expects the global biodegradable packaging market to triple from \$2.77 billion in 2020 to \$8.53 billion by 2026.

# Industry Deep Dive:

## Automotive

The auto industry is another high-visibility industry in the sustainability conversation. In fact, it was perceived as one of the worst offenders by our respondents, with 37% saying it was one of the least sustainable industries, beat out only by airlines at 39%.



### What are auto brands doing?

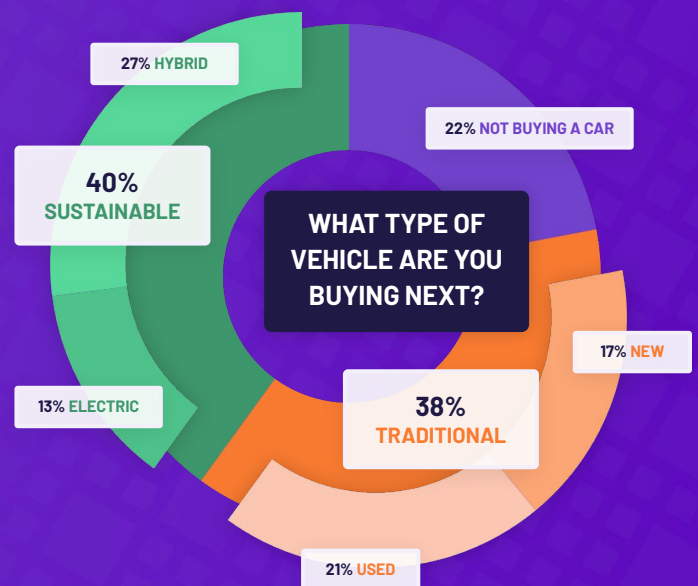
Despite conflicting demands from consumers right now, the industry is trending heavily towards sustainability. As cultural pressures mount, environmental laws in Europe and China take effect, and market pressure from competitors like Tesla keep rising, auto brands are worried that if they don't get a move on in the sustainability department that they'll be left in the dust. That's likely why brands like Volkswagen and Ford are spending so heavily on new EV factories and innovation, respectively.

### What does this mean for car companies?

For Americans that didn't plan to purchase an EV in the future, some simply preferred gas-powered cars (56%). Others were more worried about price (50%) and infrastructure — batteries running out before arriving at their destination (42%) and the added mental stress of worrying about charging their car (41%).

But times are changing. Record-high gas prices have consumers reconsidering the upfront costs of EVs, and in February, the US Departments of Transportation and Energy announced a nearly \$5 billion program to create a network of EV charging stations along the interstate highway system. Auto brands hoping to capture the latter groups of consumers can tap into this messaging, reassuring consumers that their investments will be worth it, and that EVs will only become more practical as time goes on.

But there's one big problem. Despite consumers' feelings on the auto industry's environmental impact, sustainability just isn't high on car shoppers' list of wants. With low-cost and low-risk CPG products, people were more willing to make the switch, but buying a car is a far bigger commitment.



And the sustainability conversation goes beyond electric vehicles. The materials and manufacturing processes that auto brands use are also prime targets for auto brands that want to make their entire vehicles more sustainable. Porsche, for example, has begun using a plant-based leather alternative in its interiors, while several brands of cars have started using sustainable fibers by textilemaker Lenzing for their seats.

Auto brands should also take care to communicate their efforts to consumers. Given that the industry still has a bad reputation for sustainability, making sure consumers know about the steps a brand is taking to reduce emissions and make their manufacturing processes cleaner could go a long way towards changing that perception.



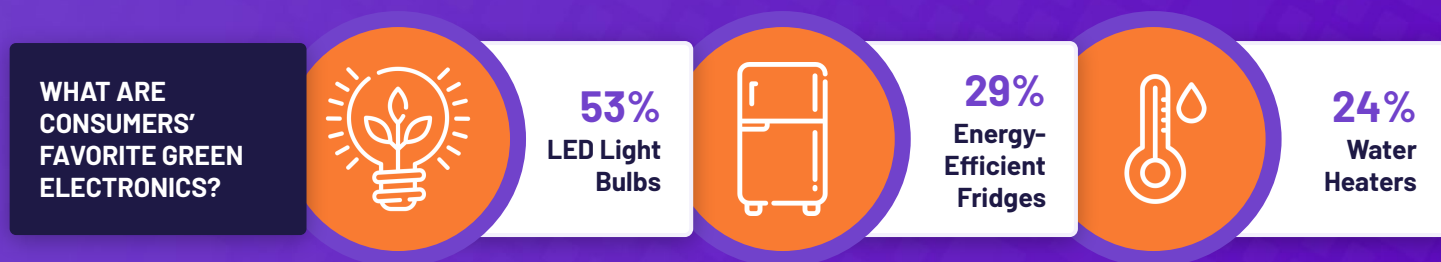
# Industry Deep Dive:

## Consumer Electronics & Technology

The [UN estimates](#) that the world generates more than 50 million tons of electronic waste every year. Only 20% of that is formally recycled. E-waste disposal education is critically low, and electronics recycling programs are even less widespread than those for plastic and paper. Nearly a quarter (23%) of our respondents said they dispose of e-waste incorrectly in a landfill or dumpster.

More than half (53%) said they just weren't sure how, and an additional 27% said it wasn't available in their community.

And consumer electronics companies have to deal with sustainability on multiple fronts. In addition to what happens to the devices themselves, there's also the question of energy efficiency.



### What are electronics brands doing right now?

#### ENERGY

Energy-efficient products are a win-win — though they can cost more, consumers feel like they're getting a deal because the savings are so easy to see in their monthly electric bills. It's no surprise companies have been investing heavily in tech like smart thermostats and smart appliances — [they're flying off the shelves](#).

#### DEVICES

Many electronics retailers offer e-waste disposal or recycling programs. For respondents that did recycle their e-waste, using retailers or brands like Best Buy, HP, or Samsung was the most popular option at 35%, beating out even municipal e-waste recycling programs (33%). From 2009 to 2019, [Best Buy alone](#) recycled more than 2 billion pounds of electronics.

### What else can electronics brands do?

#### ENERGY

It's not just about the energy consumers use to power their products — the energy a company uses to manufacture their products is also on consumers' minds. Most (61%) of respondents considered it important to purchase from brands that are using renewable energy as part of their production process. Keeping customers up-to-date on investments in sustainable materials or carbon-neutral manufacturing can pay off.

#### DEVICES

As the [right-to-repair movement](#) takes off, consumers are increasingly criticizing the short life cycle of technology and demanding the option to fix or upgrade parts of their devices. Nearly three quarters (74%) of respondents were willing to repair instead of replace their device altogether. For electronics companies, offering repair programs may be a way to save on manufacturing cost, build customer loyalty, and brand your business as sustainable — though it could be a less profitable option than selling a brand new device. Companies can also consider selling repair kits as a way to offer the option while staying profitable.



# Industry Deep Dive:

## Food & Beverage

From limiting food waste to refilling a reusable water bottle, sustainable eating and drinking has become an ongoing part of the conversation about environmentalism. But oftentimes, eating sustainably can mean spending serious cash on organic or ethical products — at a time when groceries are also being hit hard by inflation. Some consumers are even changing up deeply-ingrained eating habits to reduce their carbon footprint by going vegetarian or vegan, swapping out meat for beans or tofu.

Across the board, pricing was the number one reason why consumers struggled to make sustainable choices. 41% of respondents said it was too expensive to buy sustainable meat, fish, or dairy products. Affordability was the most important factor for consumers that did shop sustainably for those items. Limiting food waste (46%) was the most popular way consumers incorporated food sustainability into their life. The option is both sustainable and cost-efficient, and requires little lifestyle change on the part of the consumer.

### What are food and beverage brands doing?

Large grocery retailers like [Kroger](#) and Safeway are taking steps all along the food hierarchy, such as prioritizing local produce and using sustainable packaging for in-house brands. Meanwhile, smaller startups Misfits Market and Imperfect Foods are tackling specific problems — in this case, reducing waste from produce that's thrown away for being "ugly."

The dairy and meat industry is also taking steps to reduce carbon footprints. To reduce methane production, some farmers are beginning to feed their cows seaweed instead of difficult-to-digest corn. Commercial fisheries are increasingly getting certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which in turn allows retailers to offer more sustainable products to consumers. Beverage brands are moving away from virgin plastic and plastic altogether, opting instead for highly-recyclable aluminum and glass.

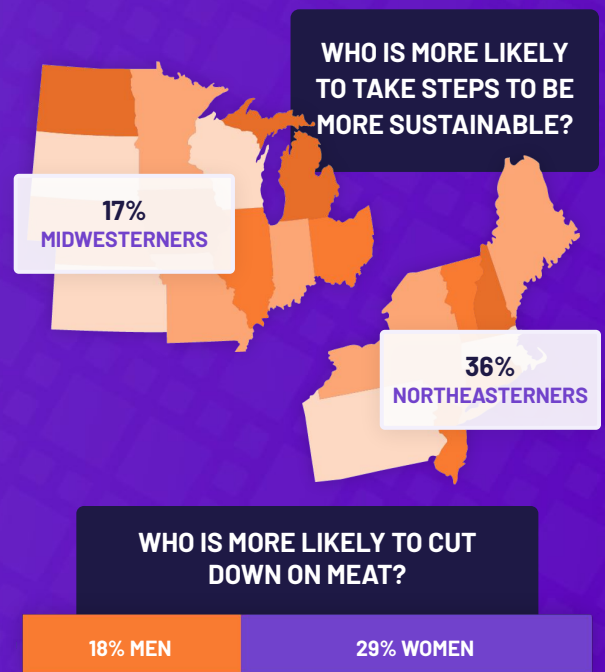
### What else can food and beverage brands do?

Ultimately, the best way to improve food sustainability is to reduce food waste at the source, says the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC). AI-driven precision agriculture has begun to take off in recent years, allowing farmers to use data to help control how much they grow and control when food is harvested to maximize yield — a win-win for farmers that is both environmentally-friendly and increases profits. Partnering with farms that use precision agriculture is one tech-enabled way that food brands can stay ahead of the curve.

Consumers want to see beverage brands continue to limit their use of plastics and reduce packaging in general. Brands can also manage their energy use, measure and reduce air and water pollution, and reduce water consumption.

Similarly, rather than give up meat entirely, consumers choose to purchase meats with a lower overall carbon footprint, like chicken (30%). Those options are often more cost-effective than other meats. When it comes to their beverages, consumers focus on recycling beverage bottles (43%) and refilling their reusable water bottles (34%).

After that, there was a steep drop-off to higher-effort options like buying organic products (30%) and eating less red meat (23%). Even those willing to spend more on organics or sustainable meat were only willing to spend a modest amount — 65% would only spend \$100 a month or less.



# Industry Deep Dive:

## Retail & Fast Fashion

Fast fashion has quickly become one of the biggest environmental concerns. According to the [US Public Research Interest Group \(PIRG\)](#), textile waste is the fastest-growing waste stream in the country, spurred on by rapidly-churning social media-influenced trend cycles and the rise of the dropshipping fulfillment model. And the production of clothing is detrimental to the environment, too: The fashion industry produces between 2% and 8% of global carbon emissions, and is the second-largest polluter of water, [according to the UN](#).

In recent years, a counter-movement of sustainable and secondhand fashion has started gaining steam. Retailers like **Everlane** and **Reformation** commit to sustainability in all parts of their business — from net-zero manufacturing emissions to using only organic cotton and microplastic-free dyes. They've become so widespread that even the biggest fast fashion giants have been feeling the heat.

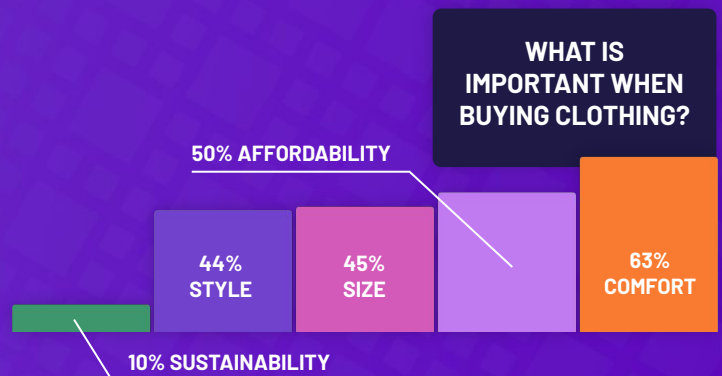
Despite the increased interest in sustainable fashion, most startups are focused on selling less articles to higher-income clientele, which means it can still be inaccessible to many due to price.

### What are fashion brands doing?

Large fashion chains have long-standing efforts to reduce some of the waste they produce. **Nike's Reuse-a-Shoe** program has been going strong since 1990, and **H&M** launched a garment recycling program in 2013 that rewards customers with 15% off when they bring in old clothes, for example. But consumers are increasingly demanding more: ethically-sourced materials, transparency around the manufacturing process, and commitments to stock only sustainable goods rather than a few select "green" items.

Though 59% of our respondents said they had shopped for sustainable clothing before, only 10% said that sustainability was a top-three concern of theirs when buying clothes. Comfort (63%), affordability (50%), size (45%) and style (44%) were far more important to most consumers.

Price (41%) and a lack of knowledge (40%) were the biggest barriers preventing people from shopping more sustainably. But consumers still had other options, like buying second hand (33%), purchasing higher-quality clothes that have a longer lifespan (31%), and repairing their garments (27%). Two thirds (68%) said they would be willing to shop at an in-person thrift or consignment store, and another 53% said they'd be willing to shop at an online secondhand store like **ThredUp** or **The RealReal**.



### What else can fashion brands do?

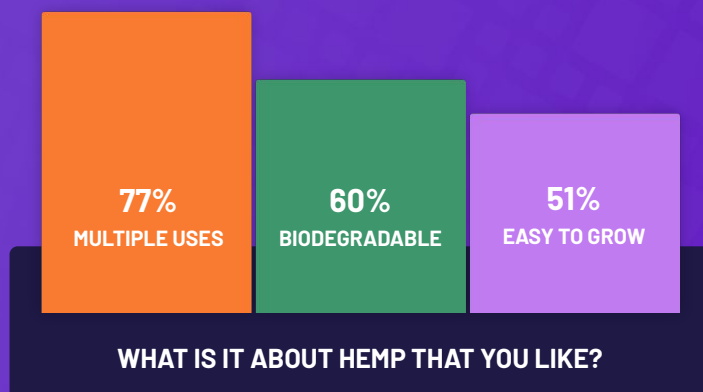
Consumers want sustainable goods that also benefit them in other ways, especially if they're going to pay more. Increasing the lifespan of garments (49%) and using less toxic chemicals in manufacturing (46%) were the most popular desires among our respondents. Consumers are also eager to hop on the secondhand wave, and brands can cash in. Brands like Urban Outfitters and Levi's now offer native third-party marketplaces where people can sell recycled (or upcycled!) clothing — and 62% of our respondents said they'd shop at a brand-owned secondhand store.



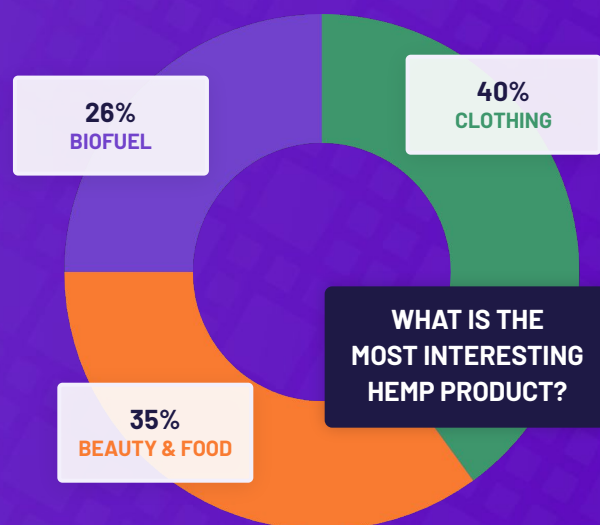
# Industry Deep Dive:

## Hemp & Cannabis

Hemp is considered one of the most sustainable crops because it needs little water, gives back to the soil, is biodegradable, and could replace many other materials, like cotton or even concrete. Though the popularity of the crop has never been fully realized due to its association with marijuana, the growing legalization movement and environmental concerns have revitalized the market for hemp — and, of course, for cannabis itself.



Though they're the same plant, the different uses have very different sustainability reputations. Only 10% of our respondents said sustainability was a concern when buying cannabis, and most (51%) said they wouldn't pay more for sustainable cannabis products. Nearly half (46%), however, view hemp as sustainable. A third (33%) were undecided and neutral about it overall — a large market that brands could capture.



### What are hemp and cannabis brands doing?

The market is still in rapid expansion mode. Hemp was only federally legalized to grow in the US in 2019, so businesses experimenting with hemp products are still figuring out market fit and doing R&D. Levi's only launched its "cottonized hemp" product, a soft-fitting hemp/cotton blend, in 2019, becoming one of the first to incorporate hemp into denim at scale, according to Sourcing Journal. As of late 2021, the company is looking to expand its hemp garment production to meet its sustainability goals.

### What else can hemp and cannabis brands do?

It's all about education, education, education. The 33% of Americans who are still undecided about hemp are a prime target, and right now is a key moment to shifting the country's sentiment on the plant.

For now, **clothing is the most interesting hemp product for consumers**, likely because the industry has focused strongly on the uses of hemp fibers: 40% of respondents said they were interested in trying hemp clothing.

Beauty products and food products like hemp seeds and hemp milk were in second place at 35% each, followed by biofuel (26%). And there are even more applications out there, from paper to bioplastic to home insulation. It's just a matter of educating consumers about the benefits — both to them and to the planet. As for sustainable cannabis, the industry likely needs to grow a lot more (and be federally legalized) before more efforts can take off.



# Cross-Industry Connections:

## What Can Industries Learn From Each Other?

Despite the massive differences in sustainability concerns and efforts across industries, there are still plenty of similarities. Plus, some industries have been dealing with environmental efforts for decades, while others are still new to the game. **Here are three key trends across industries that Suzy has uncovered:**

### Cost is a factor, but if consumers can see the savings, they're more willing to buy

From electric vehicles to organic food to [slow fashion](#), sustainable goods are often pricier than their counterparts. However, some industries have been able to sell consumers on the more sustainable options by touting the long-term savings — for example, more energy-efficient appliances that cost less to run. And while the market for sustainable goods is still relatively high-income, it's expanding.

### Brands can help education and access efforts

Many companies have stopped waiting for government programs to fill the gaps — a trend that other industries are beginning to follow. E-waste recycling programs set up by electronics brands have been around for years, but after China's recyclables ban, companies like Pepsi took up the mantle and started providing plastic recycling programs, too. Meanwhile, the newfound consumer interest in textile recycling means that the fashion industry can learn from the recycling education efforts that CPG companies have been engaging in for decades.

### Sustainability is holistic

From the manufacturing process to packaging to the way waste is dealt with, there are countless points in a product's journey where its sustainability can be improved. Some industries have made bigger strides in some of these points in the cycle — which means there are lessons to take from each. Every industry uses some form of packaging, for example, so brands across all industries can follow CPG brands' leads to use less plastic or to switch to biodegradables. Meanwhile the auto industry can learn from fashion brands on how to make their interior textile manufacturing more sustainable, and both can learn from hemp manufacturers on incorporating the sustainable crop into their fabrics.

# Digging Even Deeper

## What Else Can I Learn With Suzy?

Sustainability is such a complex topic, and there are so many more insights that we just didn't have the space to cover here. But Suzy's bespoke research offerings mean we can keep the insights flowing.

Our diverse suite of products can be customized for the exact questions you need answered. Need data quick? Suzy's monadic testing and live surveys can get you results in less than 48 hours. Suzy Live lets you speak to actual consumers one-on-one, so you can get the deep, qualitative insights you need. And with Suzy Home, you can send your products to consumers for testing and feedback purposes.

With Suzy, you can get your quantitative and qualitative insights all in one integrated system. It's like co-creating right along with the consumer. **Here are just a few examples of other questions you can ask with Suzy:**

### Do you go out of your way to buy brands that are sustainable?

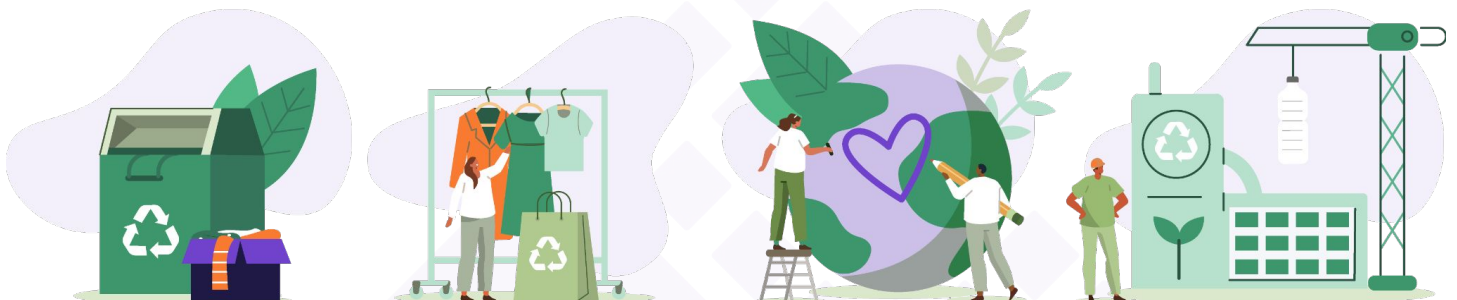
How willing are consumers to go to speciality stores or take extra steps to be more sustainable? What price point are consumers willing to purchase sustainable goods from your brand at?

### How would you prefer brands communicate about their sustainability efforts with you?

Do your consumers like quick social media updates, or longer newsletters? Would they prefer to see it in a PR piece? Learn how to communicate with consumers in the way that will best reach them.

### What steps should brands take to prove that they aren't greenwashing?

Authenticity is an issue for consumers that care about sustainability. How can you prove that you align with potential consumers and their values? Will better sustainability practices drive more brand loyalty for your business?



# Conclusion

## The Turning Tide

So much of the future is uncertain — especially as it pertains to the climate conversation. One of the few things we can clearly see is that the movement towards sustainability is gaining serious ground.

But for many brands, it can feel like a balancing act. Depending on the industry, those calls are asking for different things, and brands can feel pulled in all different directions. Plus, sustainable materials and manufacturing is still pricier than the alternative, and many consumers still aren't ready or willing to pay the higher price tag. Brands are finding themselves walking a thin tightrope between answering consumers' demands for better environmental practices — and staying in business at all.

No matter how hard it is to walk that tightrope, it's a walk that brands will need to take. As we've now learned, consumers' calls for brands to get involved are only getting louder.

Even consumers who might not be actively involved in sustainable practices are often prevented from doing so due to the lack of availability, knowledge, or high price point of sustainable goods, and they want to see brands work to change that.

And if your brand isn't actively helping consumers live more sustainable lives? Another will come and fill that gap for you. Ultimately, the brands that are able to get ahead and implement sustainable business practices now will be the best-prepared for the future.

At Suzy, we're here to help your brand keep on top of the conversation — without falling off the tightrope.

**Want to learn more about Suzy?**

Reach out to us at [suzy@suzy.com](mailto:suzy@suzy.com)

