

## Coming Clean: the Future for Greener Cleaners

Reports are widespread about the environmental and health risks posed by the use of chemicals found in household cleaning products. Words such as 'toxic', 'carcinogenic' and 'hormone-disrupting' are used to describe compounds such as alkylphenols, artificial musks and triclosan, all of which are found in everyday detergents, soaps, and laundry products. With consumers' concerns about the number of chemicals in their homes on the rise, some are shunning conventional cleaning products in favour of vinegar, baking soda and elbow grease, to the alarm of the margin-hungry supermarket buyer.

While the less zealous majority might not take things to such extremes, many customers are seeking to use cleaning products containing less hazardous chemicals. From soaps and washing powders to disinfectants and de-scalers, demand for non-polluting products is rising, and has been endorsed by the industry in the form of the Charter for Sustainable Cleaning. Many retailers including the major supermarkets have signed it. But does the charter go far enough, or should buyers look to source more 'alternative' products as savvy shoppers scout out greener cleaners?

In 2004, UK consumers spent £23 million on ethical cleaning products. Just one year later, this had risen by a huge 17.4 per cent to £27 million, according to the Co-operative Bank's annual Ethical Consumerism Report. The bank's Executive Director of Business Management, Craig Shannon, has welcomed the increase in ethical shopping and the efforts of 'far-sighted, highly motivated



for energy efficiency now account for some 60 per cent of the market), he notes that 'this has been underpinned by an EU labelling scheme, with inefficient products being removed from sale and the support of well targeted subsidies. If, as many scientists are saying, we have ten years to make a dent in climate change, it is this type of radical overhaul of the choices made available to people that is going to deliver the rapid market changes required.'

If consumers are applying pressure from one direction, regulation in the form of the new EU-wide REACH legislation, concerning the use and labelling of hazardous chemicals, means that further changes are on the way. The act, which comes into effect on 1 June, will require companies to provide safety data for chemicals that they produce or import into the EU. Companies will also have to substitute chemicals that persist in the environment or build up in our bodies with safer alternatives whenever they are

available. The industry fought for - and won - several loopholes in the law, however. Companies which import and manufacture chemicals in volumes below 10 tonnes per year - 60% of chemicals covered by REACH - may be exempt from the requirement to provide certain safety data, and the process of registering all the chemicals in question will only be completed in 2018.

Environmental campaign groups were frustrated at what they perceive as the watering down of the legislation, with Chemical Reaction - a collaboration of the European Environmental Bureau, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace - commenting: "REACH will still allow many chemicals that can cause serious health problems, including cancer, birth defects and reproductive illnesses, to continue being used in manufacturing and consumer goods. Even if safer alternatives to those dangerous substances are available, many of these chemicals of very high concern will be allowed onto the market if producers claim that they can 'adequately control' them.

"The approach of adequate control - and safe thresholds - is flawed and premised on a risky gamble, given the unknown effects of chemicals in combination, on vulnerable hormone functions, and on the development of children from the earliest stages of life. There remains plenty of room for the chemical industry to manoeuvre around the loopholes to keep hazardous substances on the market."

Meanwhile, the industry has been working from within to clean up its image. The Charter for Sustainable Cleaning was launched across the EU in December 2004 by AISE (the international association for soaps, detergents and maintenance products). Membership of the charter allows manufacturers to use a logo on products to signify compliance with a set of standards, including a level of safety for the chemicals in the product and a commitment to environmentally sustainable product design, with consideration given to the use of resources in manufacturing and disposal of packaging. Participating companies are subject to ongoing checks and improvements in a drive to improve the green credentials of the industry. Implementation of the charter started in some EU countries in late 2005, though it was only in February this year that the UK industry announced their commitment to the scheme.

Dr Andy Williams, Director General of the UK Cleaning Products Industry Association (UKCPI), commented: "So far, take up of the charter scheme has been hugely positive. The producers of the vast majority of products in both the industrial and domestic sectors have already signed up to the Charter. [It] is an example of a highly competitive industry co-operating on the environment. I applaud all those cleaning product manufacturers and retailers who are committing themselves to an extensive and comprehensive set of voluntary rules for sustainable action."

A spokesperson for Tesco added: "Tesco welcomes this initiative by the cleaning products industry. It is in all our interests to bring about improvements in sustainability, and we believe our customers will welcome it as well. The fact that the scheme is independently verified and aims to build a mindset focused on continual improvement is very encouraging."

While environmental groups have welcomed the charter, they argue that changes are not sufficiently comprehensive. Mary Rayner, a researcher from the alternative consumer

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organisation Ethical Consumer, commented: "As an industry-led initiative, ever more clued-up consumers will be wary of weak initiatives such as the Charter for Sustainable Cleaning. They want to buy brands that have a genuine commitment to the environment - of which there are many -



but can be frustrated by lack of choice and higher prices. We'd like to see supermarkets offer a wider range of environmentally friendly cleaning products and at a price that is attractive to all consumers."

Tesco is among retailers who have followed Ecover's success with own-label products. The packaging of the 'Tesco Naturally' range bears more than a passing resemblance to the market leader, leading to speculation about whether the Belgian company was manufacturing the product for Tesco (it isn't). But although own-brand eco-ranges are welcome, they are still within mainstream retailers' traditional comfort zone. Step out of the supermarkets and into more specialist environment-focused stores, and a different array of products is presented, such as Pierre d'Argent, laundry balls and the unlikely-sounding soapnuts,

which grow on trees in India and Nepal and are used as an all-purpose natural detergent. The increase in the number of independent eco-retailers suggests that there is now sufficient demand for more unusual products - once seen as the exclusive domain of hardcore environmentalists - for the major retailers to consider allocating a little shelf space to this growing corner of the market. Doing so at a time when many retailers are playing 'greener-than-thou' games with reward points and long-lasting shopping bags could earn them the respect of those clamouring for more concrete green policies in our supermarkets.

With the number of green-minded consumers on the rise, the credibility of retailers on this issue is important. A report from international food and grocery researchers IGD states that over 50% of Britons are becoming ethical shoppers. Their findings state: 'the ethical proportion of the average shopping basket has been growing, and sales of ethical products are increasing at 7.5% per year, compared with 4.2% for conventional products. Over half the UK population is ethically minded to some extent, so there is plenty of room for further growth in ... environmentally friendly products.'

"Ethical products are definitely a growth area in grocery retailing," concludes Julie Starck, Senior Consumer Analyst at IGD. "Communication and price are key for those looking to buy ethical products, and there may be an opportunity to capture shoppers' imaginations through ethical purchasing messages."

With retail analysts echoing the ethical consumer lobby in their advice to buyers, perhaps now is the time to stock up on soapnuts, load the shelves with laundry balls, and add some weight to your brand's green range.