



Five Steps Retail Leaders Must Take to Eliminate Plastic Bags

“Sustainability isn’t a marketing strategy. It’s a commitment leaders must make.”

By Lauren Hobart

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Long before I began my career in retail, plastic bags had already become deeply embedded in the global retail experience. Plastic bags became a default checkout solution for the retail industry: lightweight, inexpensive and convenient. Today, the environmental consequences of the plastic bag are impossible to ignore. According to Environment America Research & Policy Center, Americans use roughly 365 bags each year, contributing to polluted waterways, wildlife mortality and ecosystem damage. Retailers helped normalize the use of plastic bags. Across the retail industry, we have a unique opportunity and an obligation to rethink materials and habits that define the checkout experience. Real progress requires industry leadership. Here are five bag-free initiatives retailers must adopt to build a more sustainable future.

1. Eliminate Single-use Plastic Bags

The first step is simple: remove plastic bags entirely from the checkout system.

For decades, plastic bags were the automatic default that was handed out without thought. Removing the default may not seem like a huge operational initiative, but it is anything but small. Across our nation, a single decision across the powerhouse retailers can remove millions - if not billions - of plastic bags circulating our ecosystem. Real environmental change starts with dismantling the harmful system we have normalized.

2. Encourage Reuse

Eliminating plastic bags is only the beginning.

Retailers must also offer sustainable alternatives that are easy for customers to adopt. Reusable bags made from recycled fiber can help customers shop more sustainably. The National Retail Federation has reported

trillions of transactions each year. That large scale of purchases gives retailers a significant opportunity to shift consumer habits toward reusable bags if integrated seamlessly into the checkout system.

3. Collaborate Across the Industry

Plastic pollution is not a problem a single retailer can solve.

Industry coalitions and partnerships across sectors are crucial - bringing organizations together to test scalable solutions and alternatives. Industry coalitions and partnerships can work together to share innovative alternatives and accelerate solutions. A single retailer can not change the system independently. Competition must be set aside, and working together is important to make an impactful change.

4. Build Strong Recycling Systems

Sustainability cannot be guaranteed without a sustainable recycling system.

Recycling has been proposed as a solution but the system is very fragmented. Inconsistent local policies can lead to a lack of coordination in the supply chain. To build a cohesive system, retailers must play an active role in standardizing materials and partnering with local districts to create scalable standards for a strong recycling system

5. Connect Sustainability with Community Impact

Sustainability does not have to exist as one isolated initiative.

When done correctly, sustainability initiatives can strengthen communities, expand access and create shared value. The goal is not just to reduce harm, but to build something better. This starts with building a tangible local benefit. For example, retailers can offer durable bags that, with each purchase, directly fund a community impact initiative. When customers see how their choices can create real change in their communities, sustainability becomes a shared value.

Eliminating plastic bags was never about a single policy change. It requires rethinking the entire checkout system: eliminating waste, encouraging reuse, strengthening recycling programs, collaborating with other retailers, and connecting sustainability with community impact. Meaningful progress cannot rest solely on one company. The retail industry must come together to rethink the plastic system. Retail leaders have the scale

and influence to drive real impact. The question is not whether the industry is capable, it's whether they are willing to.

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