

## 'Plastic recycling is a myth': what really happens to your rubbish? (Part 3)

Perhaps there is an alternative. Since Blue Planet II brought the plastic crisis to our attention, a dying trade is having a resurgence in Britain: the milkman. More of us are choosing to have milk bottles delivered, collected and re-used. Similar models are springing up: zero-waste shops that require you to bring your own containers; the boom in refillable cups and bottles. It is as if we have remembered that the old environmental slogan "Reduce, re-use, recycle" wasn't only catchy, but listed in order of preference. Tom Szaky wants to apply the milkman model to almost everything you buy. The bearded, shaggy-haired Hungarian-Canadian is a veteran of the waste industry: he founded his first recycling startup as a student at Princeton, selling worm-based fertiliser out of re-used bottles. That company, TerraCycle, is now a recycling giant, with operations in 21 countries. In 2017, TerraCycle worked with Head & Shoulders on a shampoo bottle made from recycled ocean plastics. The product launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos and was an immediate hit. Procter & Gamble, which makes Head & Shoulders, was keen to know what was next, so Szaky pitched something far more ambitious.

The result is Loop, which launched trials in France and the US this spring and will arrive in Britain this winter. It offers a variety of household products – from manufacturers including P&G, Unilever, Nestlé and Coca-Cola – in reusable packaging. The items are available online or through exclusive retailers. Customers pay a small deposit, and the used containers are eventually collected by a courier or dropped off in store (Walgreens in the US, Tesco in the UK), washed, and sent back to the producer to be refilled. "Loop is a not a product company; it's a waste management company," says Szaky. "We're just looking at waste before it begins."

Many of the Loop designs are familiar: refillable glass bottles of Coca-Cola and Tropicana; aluminium bottles of Pantene. But others are being rethought entirely. "By moving from disposable to reusable, you unlock epic design opportunities," says Szaky. For example: Unilever is working on toothpaste tablets that dissolve into paste under running water; Häagen-Dazs ice-cream comes in a stainless steel tub that stays cold

long enough for picnics. Even the deliveries come in a specially designed insulated bag, to cut down on cardboard.

Tina Hill, a Paris-based copywriter, signed up to Loop soon after its launch in France. "It's super-easy," she says. "It's a small deposit, €3 [per container]. What I like about it is that they have things I already use: olive oil, washing pods." Hill describes herself as "pretty green: we recycle anything that can be recycled, we buy organic". By combining Loop with shopping at local zero-waste stores, Hills has helped her family radically reduce its reliance on single-use packaging. "The only downside is that the prices can be a little high. We don't mind spending a little bit more to support the things that you believe in, but on some things, like pasta, it's prohibitive."

A major advantage to Loop's business model, Szaky says, is that it forces packaging designers to prioritise durability over disposability. In future, Szaky anticipates that Loop will be able to email users warnings for expiry dates and other advice to reduce their waste footprint. The milkman model is about more than just the bottle: it makes us think about what we consume and what we throw away. "Garbage is something that we want out of sight and mind – it's dirty, it's gross, it smells bad," says Szaky. That is what needs to change. It is tempting to see plastic piled up in Malaysian landfills and assume recycling is a waste of time, but that isn't true. In the UK, recycling is largely a success story, and the alternatives – burning our waste or burying it – are worse. Instead of giving up on recycling, Szaky says, we should all use less, re-use what we can and treat our waste like the waste industry sees it: as a resource. Not the ending of something, but the beginning of something else.

"We don't call it waste; we call it materials," says Green Recycling's Smith, back in Maldon. Down in the yard, a haulage truck is being loaded with 35 bales of sorted cardboard. From here, Smith will send it to a mill in Kent for pulping. It will be new cardboard boxes within the fortnight – and someone else's rubbish soon after.