

NUS Coffee Cup Campaign | Infosheet

Here are some key facts and figures to help you develop your campaign...

Waste facts and figures

- Some research suggests we use 2.5 billion disposable cups in the UK each year, translating to 7 million cups every day¹.
- Other research suggests that figure could already be as high as 5 billion per year²
- Fewer than 1 in 400 are currently being recycled³.
- The Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch litter surveying campaign has seen a 93% increase in coffee cups found on UK beaches over the past 5 years⁴.
- UK producers only contribute 10% of the cost of packaging disposal and recycling⁵.
- Some research has suggested that a disposable coffee cup will take 30 years to break down⁶.

National opinion research

- In a national poll of UK adults, carried out by YouGov for Keep Britain Tidy, 20% say they purchase a takeaway drink at least once a week⁷.
- In the same poll, 29% of UK adults reported that they think disposable cups can be easily recycled anywhere in the UK.⁸
- The Keep Britain Tidy / YouGov poll also revealed that willingness to pay a surcharge for a disposable cup tailed off after 50p suggesting that charges of this amount would be most effective at reducing use of disposables (e.g. 14% said 10p would be the maximum amount they would pay, compared to 7% for 20p and 4% opting for 50p. 25% said they would always use a reusable cup if a charge was introduced)⁹.
- A national poll of 2137 UK adults revealed 74% would support 'incentives to encourage people to use refillable cups or bring cups back for recycling e.g. a levy or deposit to be charged on disposable coffee/drinks cups'. In the same survey, 73% of 18-24 year olds and 72% of 25-34 year olds would support this¹⁰.
- 55% of UK adults would support the introduction of a 25p extra tax on to the price of a single disposable coffee/hot drink cup¹¹
- 51% of those who regularly purchase drinks 'to go' from hot drinks outlets either 'very often' or 'quite often' back the proposal¹². Just under a third of these types of customers are against the proposal (29%).
- The policy received greater levels of support from those in older age brackets, for example 50% of 18-34 year olds support the 25p charge compared to 60% amongst over 55s¹³.
- Lower support is also seen amongst those in lower incomes, with support among those on household incomes of less than £20k per year at 48% compared to 60% amongst those earning £60k¹⁴.
- Respondents who purchased drinks 'on the go' at least rarely were also asked how the charge might influence their behaviour. 56% who bought drinks to go this often said they would be fairly or very likely to bring their own cup or container instead of paying the charge¹⁵.

- 59% of regular drinks purchases (very often/often) said they would bring their own cup or container.
- In 2011, a survey carried out by Which? revealed that 80% of respondents thought that disposable cups could be recycled in paper and cardboard facilities¹⁶.
- Costa Coffee completed a survey of 5,000 customers finding that 64% were more likely to use a reusable cup if a donation was made to charity. However, this number rose to 82% when the incentive was given to the customer directly¹⁷.

Student opinion research

- 79% of respondents to an online survey of c.1150 students completed in January 2018 say they would support a tax on manufacturers and producers based on the amount of non-recyclable packaging they use¹⁸.
- 66% of respondents to the same survey say they would support a levy on single-use packaging that customers pay when they buy a product, such as the 5p charge for single-use plastic bags¹⁹.
- 52% say they would support banning the use of single-use packaging²⁰.
- 61% say they use reusable cups instead of disposable/takeaway cups, however it is worth bearing the figures released by high street coffee chains and a study across universities in the UK (see below). It is possible that respondents selected yes to ownership of a reusable cup however usage rates are likely to be much lower²¹.
- Reasons given by those who don't already use a reusable cup as to what stops them from doing so include forgetting to take it with them when leaving home (32%), the hassle of carrying it around (31%) and seeing them as unnecessary as they recycle the takeaway cups they use (27%). 9% say they don't think the discounts offered by cafes for using reusable cups are worth it, and respondents who are men are more likely to say this²².

Behaviour change results

- Several UK coffee shops, including Costa, Starbucks, Pret A Manger, Café Nero and Paul, offer customers a 25p discount for using a reusable cup. However, just 1–2% of sales receive this discount²³.
- Eunomia Research and Consulting estimate that a 25p charge would lead to a 30% reduction in the use of disposable cups.
- In line with 'prospect theory', charges are much more effective than discounts. A charge creates an incentive for consumers to find a more financially sustainable alternative, reducing the amount of disposable packaging used. This has been demonstrated by the success of the plastic carrier bag charge which saw an 83% reduction in use of plastic bags in the first year (2015 – 2016)²⁴.
- Between September and December 2017, Bewley's Tea and Coffee UK Ltd and Cardiff University conducted a field experiment to reduce coffee cup waste. The study involved twelve business and university café sites, and was conducted in collaboration with four universities and a contract caterer. Each site received a different intervention, combining environmental messages, the provision of reusable alternatives, and financial incentives to encourage the use of reusable coffee cups. Environmental messages on the number of cups ending up in landfill, and asking customers to bring their own cup, were displayed at all sites, on a showcard and/or a poster²⁵.
- The study found that, overall, the proportion of hot drink sales with reusable coffee cups rose from 3.3% in the pre-intervention period to 7.6% in the post-intervention period. The study suggests that a cup charge may be more effective than a discount. While a discount on reusable cups did not make any difference for reusable cup sales, a charge on disposable cups increases the use of reusable coffee cups by 3.4%²⁶.

- While the increases for the individual measures were modest, greater behavioural change was achieved when combining multiple measures. Research suggests that providing free reusable alternatives in combination with a financial incentive is particularly effective. In the study above, the café site that distributed free reusable coffee cups and introduced a surcharge for disposable cups saw an increase in the use of reusable cups from 5.1% to 17.4%. The café site that distributed free reusable coffee cups and introduced a discount for the use of reusable cups saw an increase in the use of reusable cups from 1.8% to 12.4%²⁷.

References

- ¹ <https://conversation.which.co.uk/food-drink/recycling-disposable-coffee-cups-starbucks/>
- ² Eunomia
- ³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/shopping-and-consumer-news/12194148/Coffee-chains-accused-of-making-false-recycling-claims.html>
- ⁴ <https://www.mcsuk.org/news/Coffee-cup-charge-response>
- ⁵ <https://resource.co/article/charge-coffee-cups-will-help-tackle-packaging-waste-say-mps-12330>
- ⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/05/uks-billions-of-takeaway-cups-could-each-take-30-years-to-break-down>
- ⁷ Coffee Cups, YouGov poll for Keep Britain Tidy. Figures are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2132 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6th - 9th October 2017. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).
- ⁸ As above.
- ⁹ As above.
- ¹⁰ https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/sy3yazlsen/YG-Archive-151817-MCS.pdf
- ¹¹ BMG Research for The Independent, poll completed January 2018 with a representative sample of 1513 adults. <http://www.bmgresearch.co.uk/independent-bmg-poll-majority-back-latte-levy/>
- ¹² As above.
- ¹³ As above.
- ¹⁴ As above.
- ¹⁵ As above.
- ¹⁶ <https://conversation.which.co.uk/food-drink/recycling-disposable-coffee-cups-starbucks/>
- ¹⁷ http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Environmental%20Audit/Packaging/written/68823.html#_ftnref2
- ¹⁸ <https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/our-research/our-research-reports/student-opinion-students-shopping-and-business-behaviour>
- ¹⁹ As above.
- ²⁰ As above.
- ²¹ As above.
- ²² As above.
- ²³ N.b. Published prior to Pret A Manger increasing the discount to 50p for a reusable cup. http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Environmental%20Audit/Packaging/written/68823.html#_ftnref2
- ²⁴ <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/99366/1/Coffee%20cup%20summary%20report%20-%20Poortinga%20%28FINAL%29.pdf>
- ²⁵ As above.
- ²⁶ As above.
- ²⁷ As above.

Useful reports:

The Environmental Audit Committee has produced the following report which also considers the issue of disposable coffee cups and the policy measures required to address the issue:

Environmental Audit Committee, (2017), Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups - <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/657/657.pdf>