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Sustainability & COVID-19:
How Today's Crisis Will Shape Tomorrow's
Environmental Concerns

by Tim Kenyon

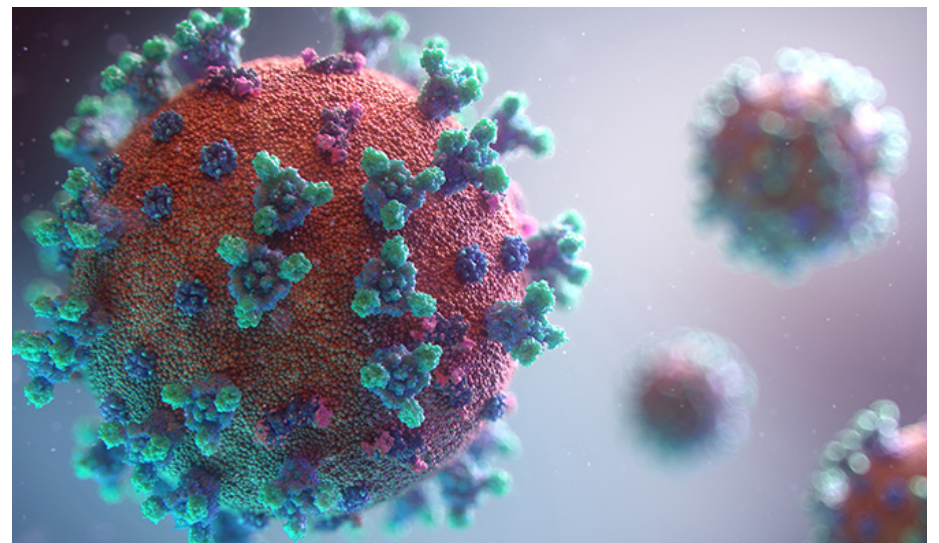


COVID-19 is changing consumers' relationship with sustainability.

On one hand, panic buying, hoarding behaviors, and a “disinfect everything” attitude point to a public that seems to be leaving social responsibility and the environment in the dust. But the drastic halt to manufacturing and commuting is also giving the environment a chance to detox; news stories suggest that some natural habitats may be returning to pre-pollutant conditions.

People are also spending more time communing with nature. In spite of social distancing guidelines, the public is swarming parks and nature trails, and there is anecdotal evidence that home gardening is booming, as people look to be the environmental stewards of their own backyards.

What will the long-term effects of COVID-19 be on the environment and consumer attitudes and behaviors? Will people be relying on toxic disinfectants for years to come, or will a sense of deeper responsibility to the Earth follow the eventual end of this pandemic?



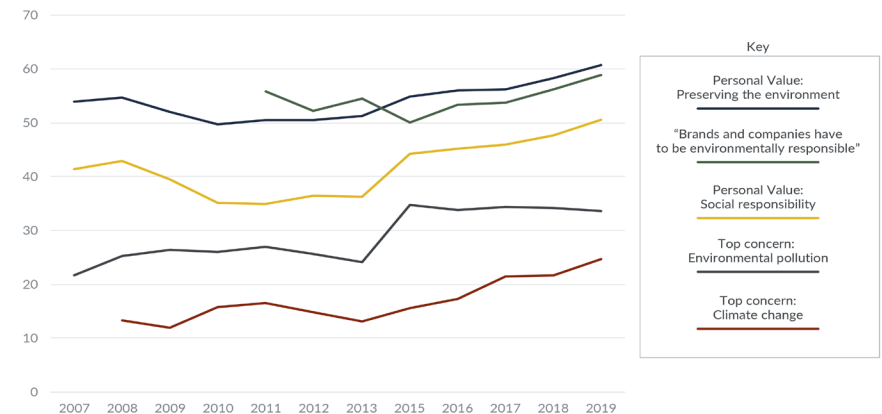


A growing concern about the Earth

The public's attitudes towards the environment are starting from a position of relative strength. In two decades of tracking the global public's top personal concerns, GfK Consumer Life has found that pollution and climate change are just a few of the issues that have consistently been on consumers' minds around the world. (GfK Consumer Life has been tracking consumer attitudes and trends in 20+ countries since 1997). Other concerns tend to ebb and flow with the worries of the time. But concern for pollution made a steady march up the list beginning in 2000. In 2019, "environmental pollution" was the second highest concern out of 21 tracked (#1 was "Money enough to live right and pay the bills").

In 2020, as the pandemic unfolds, there is early evidence from the Harvard Department of Biostatistics that long term exposure to air pollution may be linked to higher death rates of COVID-19. If more evidence links environmental problems to the spread and/or danger of the pandemic we might expect heightened concern of environmental protection as a result.

% Global Average on Various Environmental Sentiments



There are other indicators, as well, that point towards the resilience of sustainability-related trends. Over the past decade more people consider preserving the environment to be a guiding principle in their lives (61% in 2019 across 18 countries; +7 percentage points since 2007). There is also a greater sense of overall accountability, as 51% of people globally cite "social responsibility" as a guiding principle (+10 points since 2007).

People are also looking to brands for environmental leadership – most global consumers agree that brands and companies need to be environmentally responsible (59% agree in 2019; +3 points from 2011).

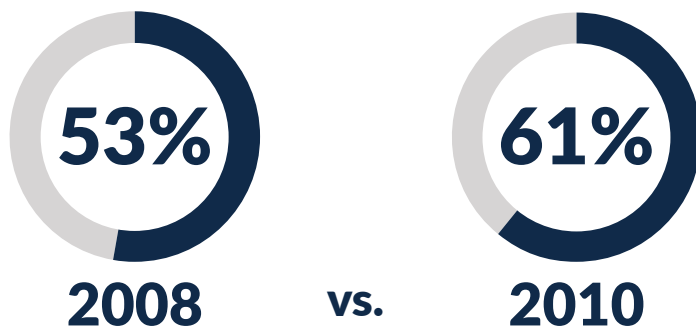
Still, it may be easy to think that people today are throwing sustainability out the window, as sales of disposable products rise and cities suspend or reduce recycling programs in response to COVID-19. In addition to the public health crisis, we are also running headlong into a deep financial recession. Typically, a financial downturn will dampen concern for broader societal issues as people become more focused on their own financial protection.

We would be naïve to think there would not be at least some impact to people's environmental attitudes and behaviors. For example, in the US from 2008 to 2010, GfK Consumer Life observed a rise in consumers who felt that environmentally friendly products were too expensive (61% in 2010 vs. 53% in 2008). This sentiment did seem to have an impact on purchase behaviors, too, as declining numbers of consumers saw less value in paying higher prices for environmentally friendly alternatives across most product categories.

But concern for the environment can also rise during times of crisis, and then continues to strengthen overtime. Not surprisingly, this holds true in countries with “greener” populations, such as Germany – but it has also been seen in the United States. In fact, the US offers an interesting case study, because historically it has registered as below average in environmental engagement (with some pockets of the population even viewed as overtly hostile towards sustainability).

Consumer Life

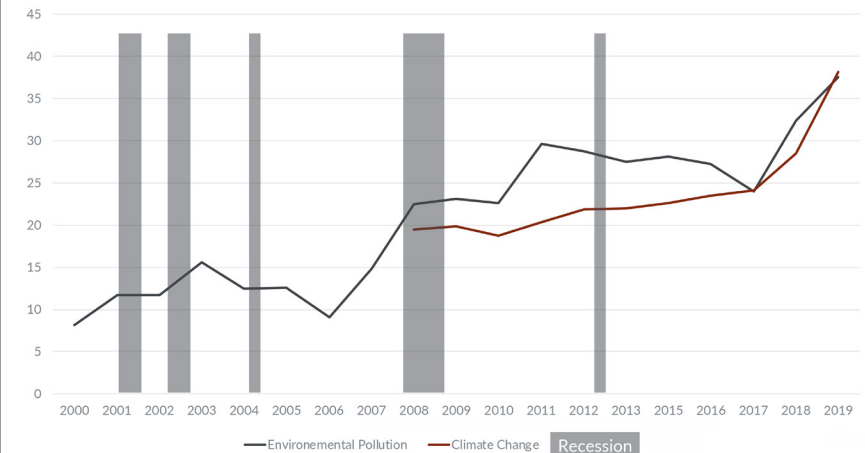
Rise in consumers who felt that environmentally friendly products were too expensive



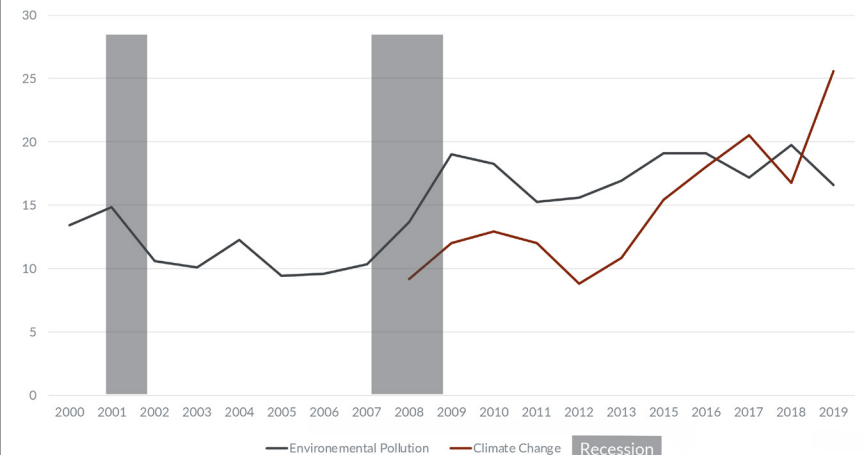
Lesson from the Great Recession: Rise in consumers who felt that environmentally friendly products were too expensive

Germany experienced two recessions in the early part of the century, and yet concern for environmental pollution increased from 2001 to 2003. And while the US did see a drop in environmental concern during the 2001 recession and in the aftermath of 9/11, concern for environmental pollution nearly doubled during the Great Recession – and there was an uptick in climate change concern, as well.

Germany. % Concern for Pollution and Climate Change



US. % Concern for Pollution and Climate Change





History teaches us that this crisis will not ultimately defeat what is now a mainstream, consumer-driven movement (by the way – the 50th anniversary of Earth Day is this year). Moreover, new strategies and opportunities related to sustainability will present themselves. For marketers and sustainability professionals, this means there are still many opportunities to engage with the public on this topic. Here are a few lessons we have learned at GfK Consumer Life about the public's attitudes towards sustainability during times of crisis.

1 Millennials and Gen Z will keep the movement afloat

Millennials grew up with a heavy dose of environmental education in the 1980s and early 1990s – from the “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” mantra they learned in grade school to TV shows and movies (see Captain Planet, Free Willy) that brought sustainability straight into popular culture.

This education came to fruition as Millennials started to enter adulthood in the 2000s. During the Great Recession, GfK Consumer Life research showed Millennials taking the reins of environmentalism from the Baby Boomer generation. In 2007, 48% of Boomers in the US said the “environment is very serious and should be a priority for everyone” versus 44% of Millennials. By 2010, these proportions had flipped, with 45% of Millennials agreeing with this sentiment, compared to just 36% of Boomers. Millennial parents gravitated towards sustainability (and still do), especially as they look to protect their children from what they see as harmful chemicals.

Today, Gen Z have in some ways become even stronger environmental stewards than their older Millennial brothers and sisters. Last year, we saw record climate change protests, with stark images of youthful activists like Greta Thunberg staring down political leaders. According to GfK Consumer Life data, Gen Z in the US is more likely to be concerned about climate change and environmental pollution than Millennials, Gen X, or Baby Boomers.

In short, Millennials and Gen Z see environmental protection as table stakes for brands and governments – and they will remember when institutions of any kind betray the values they hold dear.



2 Focus on messages around protection and safety

In times of crisis, people desire more control in their personal lives as the world outside becomes more volatile. People want to feel empowered and provide more protection to their families. As it relates to sustainability, tout the practicality of “going green” and how it can provide health protections (e.g. minimization of harmful chemicals) or save money (e.g., energy-saving products). These sensible messages have helped to fuel demand for products across categories. For example, during the Great Recession and the immediate aftermath, GfK Consumer Life data saw a rise in the number of people who were willing to pay more money for energy-saving light bulbs (because it helped them save money on their energy bills).

Where personal safety and comfort align with the greater good, there is a win-win opportunity for brands and social institutions.

3 Nature provides emotional and mental shelter

During the Great Recession, people retreated to parks and home gardening for (inexpensive) solace. According to GfK Consumer Life, “visiting parks and other outside destinations” as a favorite monthly recreational activity rose by four and five percentage points in Germany and the US, respectively, between 2008 and 2010, and consistently remained higher through the end of the 2010's. Today, public officials are grappling with a surge of people venturing outside, while still trying to maintain social distancing guidelines. But this phenomenon points to an underlying theme that nature provides solace, especially in times of uncertainty. From a branding perspective, themes around nature, natural, organic will still resonate.

Where personal safety and comfort align with the greater good, there is a win-win opportunity for brands.



4 Keep innovating with a sustainability mindset

The public health crisis will be measured in months, while the economic fallout will likely take much longer to resolve. Still, there will be lessons and strategies to be learned for the future. Several successful brands with a mantra of social responsibility were forged in the tumult of the Great Recession – online retailers Tom's Shoes (2006) and Warby Parker (2010) helped pioneer the “buy a pair, give a pair” model, tapping into their customers' socially responsible mindset.

Consumers are also paying close attention to how brands are responding during the pandemic. In GfK's Coronavirus Consumer Pulse study, 3 in 4 Americans said that what companies do during the crisis will impact whether they do business with them in the future. Brands that work towards the common good and solving societal problems will be rewarded (see Anheuser-Busch and Diageo switching production towards hand sanitizer or automotive manufacturers producing ventilators).

In addition, the foundations of today's circular economy were built during the Great Recession as companies and people looked to save more and use less. Look for this trend to accelerate.

An opportunity to define the rebound

There is almost no doubt that the Coronavirus pandemic will change life as we know it for the months and years to come. Concerns related to public health and the economy are roaring towards the forefront, and this will impact how people prioritize sustainability in the short term.

But sustainability and environmental concern are anything but fads; they are mainstream movements baked into the culture. Climate change effects continually remind us that the Earth demands our attention; the futures of today's parents, children, and grandchildren will be impacted.

How the public engages with sustainability will evolve in new and different ways – especially as companies and brands look to conserve more and help solve problems. Brands, companies and other social institutions that continue to put a focus on sustainability will help to define the inevitable rebound.



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