

Fast-food brands make an effort to cut down on plastic



(Farhnaz Fazli/CBC)

Globally, we produce nearly 300 million tons of plastic waste every year, and an estimated eight million of it ends up in the world's oceans. A fair number of those items are disposable plastic packaging and cutlery used in fast-food restaurants.

A concerted push from environmentalists and conscientious consumers has forced big chains to grapple with their use of plastic, and some have found new ways to address the problem.

A&W Canada, for example, pledged their commitment last year to eliminating plastic straws by investing in paper ones. They're produced by a company called Aardvark, which says their straws are 100 per cent biodegradable, compostable and sustainably sourced. A&W said the switch to paper will keep 82 million plastic straws out of landfills every year.

Last summer, Starbucks joined the movement to ban plastic straws, but their approach was: Why use straws at all?

The coffee chain said that by 2020, it will replace straws for most of their iced drinks

with a recyclable strawless lid that is shaped like a child's sippy cup (above). Starbucks says the lid shape will make it easy to sort and recycle, unlike plastic straws, which generally end up in landfills.

Megan Byers, a plastic reduction expert at the U.S.-based Product Stewardship Institute, thinks the initiatives taken by these fast-food restaurants are a "good first step."

"I understand the challenges that fast-food restaurants face in reducing disposables in the midst of our on-the-go convenience culture, but ... there is always something that can be done to reduce the plastic footprint."

Ikea, which is primarily a furniture retailer but also has a very popular cafeteria, has promised to go even further in phasing out single-use plastic items by the end of this year. Instead of investing in novel alternatives, IKEA has opted for a more old-school idea: glass cups, porcelain mugs and plates, as well as metal cutlery.

"Many fast-food restaurants offer tables where customers can consume their meals. In those cases, trying out reusable options like trays, plates, cutlery, cups, et cetera, makes a lot of sense," said Byers.

She said that a plastic reduction plan for a major fast-food chain "comes about over time." The first step to making a big difference is to "eliminate what you don't need, reuse what you can."

— *Farhnaz Fazli*

What's on your mind?

Responding to Emily Chung's piece last week on [right to repair in Canada](#), email writers seemed largely in favour of unlocking the restrictions many gadget makers put on fixing their products.

This thoughtful note from one reader spoke to a larger issue: "I think the more glaring problem with today's throw-away society is that manufacturers have been allowed to sell products with very low life expectancy. Whether it's cars, computers or household appliances, they are rarely made with long-term quality and reliability in mind anymore. This design mentality contributes to more garbage, just like single-use plastic packaging."

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