

The World's Biggest Brands Want You to Refill Your Orange Juice and Deodorant

P&G, Nestlé and others try to curb plastic waste; Tropicana in glass bottles, Tide in metal cans

By [Saabira Chaudhuri](#)

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The world's biggest makers of shampoo, detergent and packaged food will test selling their products in reusable containers, adopting a milkman-style model to address mounting [concerns about plastic waste](#).



[Procter & Gamble](#) Co. [PG](#) -1.51%, [Nestlé](#) SA, [NSRGY](#) 0.46% [PepsiCo](#) Inc. [PEP](#) -1.06% and [Unilever](#) [UL](#) -1.07% PLC are among 25 companies that, this summer, will start selling some products in glass, steel and other containers designed to be returned, cleaned and refilled.

Critics question whether the project will achieve scale in the face of high costs and entrenched consumer behavior. But, if successful, the companies say the efforts will reduce waste from single-use packaging. It could also be a way to woo eco-conscious consumers, glean data and foster brand loyalty.

“I sometimes wonder if it’s a fair accusation that we’re in the branded litter business,” Unilever Chief Executive Alan Jope said at a conference Tuesday, adding that the company must do more on plastic waste. “That’s what people care about right now.”

Unilever will sell nine brands in refillable containers as part of the initiative, which will be run by recycling company TerraCycle Inc. and start with 5,000 shoppers in New York and Paris in May. The pilot will extend to London later this year and cities including Toronto and Tokyo next year, according to TerraCycle.

Unilever estimates a refillable steel container for its Axe and Dove stick deodorants will last eight years—long enough to prevent the disposal of as many as 100 traditional deodorant packages.

Refillables once dominated industries such as beer and soft drinks but lost out to convenient, affordable single-use containers. In 1947, refillables made up 100% of soft-drink containers by volume and 86% of beer containers, according to the Container Recycling Institute, a nonprofit. By 1998 those figures dropped to 0.4% and 3.3%, respectively.



Unilever says a refillable container for its Axe and Dove stick deodorants will last eight years.PHOTO: TERRACYCLE

While a handful of entrepreneurs have founded businesses that sell shampoo and detergents in refillable containers, and some grocery stores sell in bulk to consumers who bring their own containers, the practice is niche.

“From a philosophical point of view, we have got to lean in and learn about this stuff,” said Simon Lowden, president of PepsiCo’s global snacks group, who also leads a task force on plastic waste. “People talk about recyclability and reuse and say they’d like to be involved in helping the environment, so let’s see if it’s true.”

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PepsiCo will sell its Tropicana orange juice in a glass bottle and Quaker Chocolate Cruesli cereal in a stainless-steel container as part of the trial.

P&G will sell 10 brands, including Pantene shampoo in an aluminum bottle, Tide laundry detergent in a stainless-steel container and an Oral B toothbrush with a durable handle and a replaceable head.

“It’s really about a new delivery system and making sure once people are hooked into this they stay with the product,” said P&G’s chief sustainability officer, Virginie Helias.

Shoppers who the companies select for the trial will be able to order hundreds of products—including Nestlé’s Häagen-Dazs ice cream and [Clorox Co.](#)’s wet wipes—from a website for home delivery. Products arrive in a reusable tote with no extra packaging. Once finished, users schedule a pickup for empty containers to be cleaned and refilled. They can sign up for a subscription-based service that replenishes products once empty containers are returned. TerraCycle will handle delivery, returns and cleaning.

The products will cost roughly the same as the versions in single-use containers, but users will also have to pay a deposit of \$1-\$10 per container. Shipping charges start at roughly \$20, decreasing with every item added.



Nestlé's Häagen-Dazs ice cream will be among the hundreds of products available through the refillable-container project. PHOTO:TERRACYCLE

“Recycling is not the answer to garbage,” said TerraCycle CEO Tom Szaky. “The real problem is how do we solve waste, and the root cause of waste is disposability.”

Proponents of refillables say they can reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, waste and energy use. A bottle refilled five times as part of the project has an impact equivalent to five single-use bottles when accounting for the use of resources and the release of pollutants, estimates TerraCycle. Each use after that is incrementally better for the environment, it says.

The project isn't likely to be profitable anytime soon given its small scale. Companies have had to invest between six and seven figures per product to subsidize prices and develop packaging, among other things.

"You simply have to start somewhere to test it and see what the barriers are and who actually buys into the model," said Unilever's research-and-development chief, David Blanchard. "If there are sufficient people then you can scale it."



PepsiCo intends to sell its Tropicana orange juice in a glass bottle as part of the trial.

PHOTO:TERRACYCLE

Unilever participated in a 2010 pilot to sell laundry detergent in refillable containers, but that effort failed in part because consumers didn't like the inconvenience of washing containers and returning to stores for refills, Mr.

Blanchard said. The coming trial is more convenient because consumers don't have to clean the containers or physically return them to stores.

Susan Collins, head of the Container Recycling Institute, said high deposit fees could be a barrier to entry for many consumers. "It sounds like it's only meant to attract the most green, virtuous shoppers," she said.

TerraCycle hopes to bring big retailers on board so that customers eventually buy and return most of the products in store or online via retailers, lowering the project's costs and expanding its reach. So far, French supermarket giant [Carrefour](#) SA has signed up. TerraCycle said it is negotiating with potential partners in the U.S., Canada and the U.K.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Simon Lowden is president of PepsiCo Inc.'s global snacks group. An earlier version of this article incorrectly described him as head of marketing for global snacks. (Jan. 24, 2019)