NEW REPORT: EUROPEAN SUPERMARKETS GUILTY OF DECEPTION ON THE PLASTIC CRISIS

- First-ever European ranking of supermarkets reveals lack of action on plastic pollution crisis
- The average rating achieved by retailers was only 13.1 out of 100
- Supermarkets stalling progress on legislation aimed at tackling plastic pollution

RETAIL giants across Europe guilty of promoting false solutions to the plastic pollution crisis and perpetuating double standards, a new report finds.

The first-ever analysis of the role European supermarkets play in addressing plastic pollution, “Under wraps? What Europe’s supermarkets aren’t telling us about plastic” is a result of collaboration of over 20 NGOs, members of Break Free from Plastic movement, from across Europe.

The specially designed ranking developed by The Changing Markets Foundation revealed a near-complete lack of ambition across three categories: Transparency and performance, Commitments, and Support for government policy.

The overall average score achieved by retailers was only 13.1 out of 100.

Of 130 retailers contacted, only 39 retailers (30%) provided a written response to the coalition’s questionnaire, but many of these responses did not provide meaningful replies to the questions.

Further analysis of 74 retailers across 13 countries revealed a concerning lack of actions to tackle the plastic crisis.

Retailers from the UK and France scored 39.6% and 23.3% respectively. No other country achieved a total average of more than 20%. The average score achieved by retailers in Spain, the Czech Republic and Estonia was below 10%.

The report uncovered notable discrepancies in scores within international retail groups. Lidl, a brand from the biggest European retail group Schwarz with 125.3 billion EUR turnover in 2020,1 achieved 44.7% in the UK and between 13% and 23.7% in other countries such as Germany and the Czech Republic.

Similarly, ALDI Süd was the top performer in the UK and Ireland, with 65.3% and 61% respectively, but it only achieved 11% in Austria, where it operates under the name Hofer, and 25.7% in Germany. Aldi is the second biggest retailer in Europe with 106.3 billion EUR turnover2.

European supermarkets were found to use delay, distract and derail tactics to avoid accountability for the plastic crisis and lobby against progressive legislation, such as deposit return schemes. With the

1 Food Retailers in Europe and worldwide (retail-index.com)
2 Food Retailers in Europe and worldwide (retail-index.com)
EU aiming to tackle excessive and single-use packaging through the revision of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive and legislation on Green Claims, European retailers are not facing up to their responsibility to address the plastic crisis.

Nusa Urbancic, Campaigns Director at the Changing Markets Foundation, commented: “Our report shows that even the best performers, such as ALDI and LIDL have double standards, when it comes to addressing the plastic crisis. They performed well in the UK and Ireland, but show abysmal results in Spain, Germany and other countries where they operate.

“Such differences cannot be explained through different national legislation and show that not a single retailer is responding to the plastic crisis with the urgency this situation demands. Instead of investing in systemic solutions, such as plastic reduction and reuse systems, retailers were found to be greenwashing and delaying legislation.”

Instead of supporting government legislation, supermarkets were found to be members of numerous voluntary schemes, such as Plastic Pacts and New Plastics Economy (both set up by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation). The Foundation itself reported that over 60% of plastic their supermarket signatories put on the market was non-recyclable.

Supermarkets were also found to be promoting false solutions, such as in-store flexible plastic take-back schemes in the UK and rebranding single-use plastic products as “reusable” in Spain. Meanwhile, European supermarket plastic packaging waste that was exported to third countries for recycling, has been found dumped and polluting the environment.

Christina Dixon, from the Environmental Investigation Agency commented: “Real change also requires support from government: they must provide ambitious and binding policy frameworks which ultimately lead to plastic reduction, especially that of hard to recycle and non-essential plastics, and a prioritisation of reusable and refillable packaging. Our work with UK retailers has shown that with public pressure, accountability and political will, inroads can be made, but the pace of change is not nearly fast enough to meet the scale of the plastics challenge at hand.”

Although the current retailer performance is disappointing, the analysis also shows that such abysmal results do not have to remain the reality. Combining the best responses to each question created a fictional “best-in-class” retailer with the total score of 82.7%.

Rosa Pritchard of ClientEarth commented: “A number of the supermarkets included in this report are public companies and as such they have legal obligations to be transparent about their performance on plastics. But crucially, disclosure obligations are going to become much stricter for all companies in the coming years. That’s why those at the bottom of the ranking need to start preparing now to be able to adapt to tomorrow’s legal environment.”

Justine Maillot, Policy coordinator of the Rethink Plastic Alliance: “This report, by highlighting the poor performance of retailers and double standards between countries, comes as another evidence of the urgent need for EU legislative measures to reduce packaging and prevent waste across Europe. The revision of the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive provides a critical opportunity to end wasteful practices and make the best packaging-free and reuse practices the norm across Europe.”
Retailers should embrace rather than resist the ongoing reuse revolution/transition and join the increasing number of voices across Europe asking for ambitious policies to support reuse.”

Despite the urgency to act, the amount of plastic that the plastic industry is placing on the market is growing and on a “business as usual” trajectory is even projected to skyrocket. European supermarkets are very important actors when it comes to plastic pollution. With a 2.4 trillion EUR turnover, the European retail sector has the resources to act, and public opinion polls consistently show that citizens firmly believe retailers have a responsibility to address plastic pollution.4

www.changingmarkets.org

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Notes to editors

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For a copy of the report in full or for a summarised breakdown of the findings please contact ryan@higginsstrategy.com

Changing Markets Foundation:

The Changing Markets Foundation was formed to accelerate and scale up solutions to sustainability challenges by leveraging the power of markets.

Working in partnership with NGOs, other foundations and research organisations, we create and support campaigns that shift market share away from unsustainable products and companies and towards environmentally and socially beneficial solutions.

For more information visit www.changingmarkets.org

Break Free From Plastic:

#breakfreefromplastic is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in 2016, more than 2,000 organizations and 11,000 individual supporters from across the world have joined the movement to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

BFFP member organizations and individuals share the shared values of environmental protection and social justice and work together through a holistic approach to bring about systemic change. This means tackling plastic pollution across the whole plastics value chain—from extraction to disposal—focusing on prevention rather than cure and providing effective solutions.

For more information visit: www.breakfreefromplastic.org

3 Food Retailers in Europe and worldwide (retail-index.com)
4 Recent IPSOS poll showed that 85% of respondents globally want manufacturers and retailers to be held responsible for reducing, reusing and recycling plastic packaging, up from 80% previously. | Reuters