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First UAE conscious consumer study highlights need for urgent action

Conscious consumers are beginning to shun products and services seen as unsustainable

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Conscious consumerism is gaining strength in the UAE and people are actively seeking products and services that align with their sustainability values. As the frustration with limited availability of sustainable alternatives grows, consumers have begun to reject and shun products and services they do not consider to be sustainable.

These are among the key findings of a ground-breaking independent study, “Conscious Consumer UAE – state of play 2019”. Sustainability Advisory, a Dubai-based consultancy and international network of sustainability experts, conceived and launched the study early this year in support of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 and UAE's National Agenda 2021. SDG 12 focuses on responsible consumption and production.

“As the first survey of its kind in the UAE, we wanted to ensure that we took time to explore consumer feedback with both qualitative and quantitative research phases. Our qualitative phase involved Discovery Café workshops and an ethnographic study. This fed into our online survey which ran in June and July this year. The response was tremendous at all stages. Over 1,300 people representing 90 nationalities from all seven emirates participated in the online survey,” said Helen Sell, Sustainability Advisory's consumer insight expert.

Although an overwhelming majority found it either difficult or very difficult to live sustainably in the UAE (76 per cent), the strong desire to do so was evident with nearly everyone stating that they were committed to moving towards a sustainable lifestyle (96 per cent). Further proof of this commitment comes from the fact that 57 per cent of consumers are actively looking for alternative products and services. Significantly, 77 per cent stated that they had chosen not to buy a product in the previous six months as they did not consider it sustainable.

A group of deeply committed consumers have even begun to make their own products when they are unable to find acceptable alternatives. Key examples of home-made products included laundry detergents, household cleaners and toiletries.

Survey participants sought government intervention to ensure easier access to sustainable products and services, reduce waste and enable sustainable lifestyle choices, with more than half asking for an outright ban on single-use plastic (52 per cent). Participants throughout all stages of the study were highly supportive of more direct and specific legislation, as well as incentives, that would have a positive impact on UAE's sustainability performance.

Conscious consumers in UAE are also unequivocal in their opinion that businesses must do more to offer sustainable alternatives that are clearly and credibly labelled. While 96 per cent of the respondents maintained that businesses should take more responsibility to ensure availability of more sustainable products, 75 per cent found it difficult to trust product and business claims about sustainability.

Maria Sillanpaa, Founder Director of Sustainability Advisory, said she hoped that the UAE's leaders, business heads, sustainability practitioners and experts would welcome the Conscious Consumer UAE study and its outcome. "We believe that the results could be a major catalyst in informing policy initiatives in UAE related to sustainability and responsible consumption. There is a clear signal that people want legislative and regulatory interventions and strict enforcement in sustainability-related matters that affect consumption," she said.

Helen Sell said that the impetus for this shift towards conscious consumer behaviour is not only being driven by environmental concerns (91 per cent), but that health concerns (61 per cent), a desire to protect resources for future generations (65 per cent) and better product quality (31 per cent) were also major factors. People are also deeply anxious about climate change with nearly everyone stating that they felt some level of anxiety.

Waste emerged as a key topic in both the qualitative and quantitative studies. Plastic waste was a central concern, with over two-thirds saying that they are actively reducing the amount of plastic purchased and used. Consumers are even choosing to reject products that are overpackaged, even if the product contents are considered sustainable, with many participants choosing to reject them outright.

On the topic of recycling, nearly half of those who took part in the survey said that they recycle plastic, though many expressed frustrations that gaining access to recycling facilities was not always easy, with 63% saying they would be encouraged to recycle more if this issue was resolved. Others sought more confidence that what is recycled does not end up in landfill (60 per cent), more information about what can and cannot be recycled (40 per cent) and incentives to encourage recycling (21 per cent).

While every 2 out of 3 complained that sustainable alternatives are always more expensive than conventional ones, every 8 out of 10 said that they have knowingly paid more for a sustainable alternative.

"There is a powerful message for businesses too as consumers not only want more alternatives but trustworthy and clear information backing up any sustainability claims. Our survey clearly shows that consumers are ready to change their lifestyles but are calling for support from both the government and businesses," Sillanpaa said.

Sustainability Advisory is keen to ensure that the study and its findings lead to collaborative efforts by the government, business and consumers to bring about real changes in consumer behaviours and business practices, making a significant contribution to UAE's sustainability goals, she said.

"We launched and managed the study as a passion project by leveraging the time and resources of our associates and committed volunteers. We are working to ensure that the Conscious Consumer UAE project sets the foundations for consumer behaviour tracking in the country and develop this into an annual benchmarking research that will be enormously useful for the government, business and consumers," Sillanpaa said.

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About Sustainability Advisory

Based in Dubai since 2007, Sustainability Advisory is an international network of highly experienced sustainability specialists, bringing decades of wide-ranging technical, sectoral and cultural expertise to our work.

We design, build and deliver solutions that add value to sustainability strategies by turning challenges and obligations into win-win opportunities. We take a leadership role to facilitate a shared understanding between key stakeholders and identify the most effective strategies for engaging consumers in sustainable consumption; guiding businesses towards responsible production; and, enabling the public sector to affect impactful solutions for the better.

About Conscious Consumerism

Conscious consumerism is about consumers making deliberate choices while buying products and services to choose more sustainable alternatives and avoid or give up unsustainable ones. A conscious consumer is aware of the societal and environmental implications of their purchasing decisions. Many like to consider conscious consumerism as 'voting with their wallet', thinking that consumers can influence the market through purchasing decisions.

About sustainable products and services

A universally recognised definition of sustainable products and services is still evolving. Sustainable products and services are typically designed to eliminate or minimise negative ecological, social, human and/or economic impacts along their life cycle, from extraction of raw materials to disposal. A sustainable product or service may seek to address one impact factor (e.g. animal welfare) or a wide range of factors such as, for instance, water consumption, carbon footprint, packaging choices, labour practices, health and so on. Some products and services are specifically designed to make a positive contribution to dealing with socio-ecological problems such as poverty or climate change.

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Attachments

Conscious Consumer UAE – state of play 2019 summary report

A photographic image