



## THE PLAYBOOK

How retailers can use fewer single-use bags and encourage customers to bring their own reusable bags

# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
HOW RETAILERS CAN USE FEWER SINGLE-USE BAGS AND ENCOURAGE CUSTOMERS TO BRING THEIR OWN	4
• COMMUNICATIONS	6
• EMPLOYEE TRAINING	8
• BAG AND FIXTURE DESIGN	11
• CUSTOMER INCENTIVES	13
WHAT WE LEARNED TOGETHER	15





## About the Center for the Circular Economy at Closed Loop Partners

The Center for the Circular Economy is the innovation arm of Closed Loop Partners, a leader in the circular economy space comprised of three key business segments: an investment firm, innovation center and operating group. The Center executes research and analytics and unites organizations to tackle complex material challenges and implement systemic change that advances the circular economy. The Center brings together designers, manufacturers, brands, recovery systems operators, trade organizations, municipalities, policymakers and NGOs to create, invest in and support scalable innovations that target big system problems.

MANAGING PARTNER



FOUNDING PARTNERS



SECTOR LEADS



SUPPORTING PARTNERS



ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERS



## About the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag

The Beyond the Bag Initiative, launched by the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag, aims to identify, pilot and implement viable design solutions and models that more sustainably serve the purpose of the current retail bag. Closed Loop Partners' Center for the Circular Economy launched the initiative in 2020 with Founding Partners CVS Health, Target and Walmart and it has grown to a partnership with more than a dozen retailers, alongside Conservation International and Ocean Conservancy as Environmental Advisory Partners.

## About the playbook

The playbook is the product of a first-of-its-kind collaboration among Closed Loop Partners and many of the world's leading retailers, including 14 retail partners in the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag and three additional external retailers. Retail consultancy firm McMillanDoolittle performed secondary research, conducted 50+ surveys and 25+ interviews with retailers. We share here some of the key insights gleaned from the quantitative and qualitative surveys and interviews, supplemented with additional secondary research and analysis.

## Our approach

The Center for the Circular Economy works with partners to innovate, test and scale effective and affordable alternatives to single-use plastic bags, focusing both on near-term solutions and long-term innovations.

Specifically, this playbook focuses on near-time bag reduction wins any retailer can implement by reducing the number of bags needed and encouraging the use of reusable bags many of us already have at home. Throughout the playbook, we walk you through strategies that work – whether via retailer communications, prompts, designs and incentives – and help you get your teams on board with reducing single-use bags and encouraging shoppers to reuse their own bags. This is a tool for those just beginning, identifying quick wins and building momentum, and for those further along, seeking new ways to continue pushing the envelope.

In addition, the Center for the Circular Economy also focuses on longer term innovations, testing end-to-end reusable bag services on-site, offered when customers forget their own reusable bags, and exploring compostable and recyclable bag alternatives. But these innovative alternative materials need time to scale and can only serve as a complement to increased use of existing reusable bags.

We hope the key insights in this playbook serve as inspiration for retailers, no matter where they are on their journey, looking to deploy near-term, tangible solutions to use fewer single-use plastic bags and encourage customers to bring their own reusable bags.

## METHODOLOGY



### RETAILER SURVEY

50+ quantitative and qualitative surveys identified planned, tested and fully implemented solutions to advance the reduction of single-use plastic bags across Consortium Partners

Received responses from a diverse array of functional areas at companies, such as:

- Sustainability
- Store Operations
- Sourcing & Procurement
- Government Affairs
- Engineering



### RETAILER INTERVIEWS

25+ in-depth virtual interviews with retailers gleaned insights from past, present and future bag reduction and reuse efforts



### SECONDARY RESEARCH

Secondary research identified additional solutions and added supplemental data

## Why reducing single-use plastic bags is a win-win

It's estimated that we use 100 billion plastic bags per year in the U.S. alone and fewer than 10% of these are recycled. While the convenience of the single-use plastic retail bag can't be disputed, the negative impact — considering its short use (12 minutes, on average) and long estimated lifespan — have led to rising customer concern, advocacy campaigns and regulatory bans and fees.

Resource limits, supply chain disruption and plastic pollution increase the urgency of moving away from our current, linear take-make-waste economic system and “disposable” culture toward a more circular economy, in which materials are shared and re-used. Reducing the number of single-use bags retailers use across their stores can make a tremendous difference. Even a 1% bag reduction has a significant impact on our waste footprint – in the U.S. that is equivalent to 1 billion fewer bags used and discarded.

Beyond realizing near-term, positive environmental impact that drives progress toward sustainability goals, increased bag reduction and encouraging customers to bring their own bag can also help retailers:

- Reduce costs through operational efficiencies
- Address challenges in stocking reusable bags
- Support and engage employees and customers
- Build brand reputation and loyalty



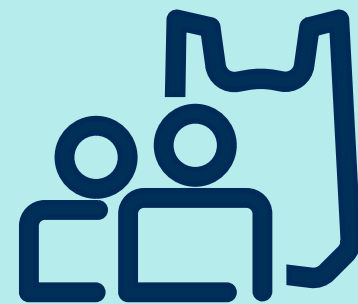
# HOW RETAILERS CAN USE FEWER SINGLE-USE BAGS AND ENCOURAGE CUSTOMERS TO BRING THEIR OWN

Retailers should consider strategic, financial, people, environmental and operational constraints when deciding which efforts to undertake across the following four categories:



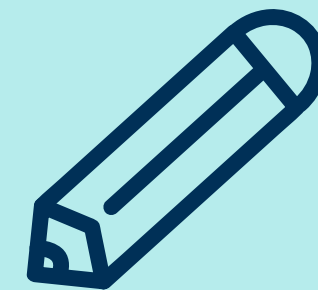
## COMMUNICATIONS

Inform and influence customers



## EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Optimize bagging and prompts to customers



## BAG AND FIXTURE DESIGN

Retail a mix of reusable bags and position them effectively in store



## CUSTOMER INCENTIVES

Provide motivation to use fewer single-use bags and more reusable bags

# WHERE TO BEGIN?

There are solutions available for retailers at every stage of their bag journey. For those starting out, focusing on low-effort, high-impact efforts builds momentum. For those further along in their journey, each solution can reinforce and compound the benefits of another.

Starting out

→ Pushing the envelope

Higher priority

Lower priority

	QUICK WINS Lower effort	INCREMENTAL EFFORTS Medium-high effort	BIG BETS High effort
Higher priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Leverage signage to influence reuse behavior</li> <li> Identify no bag items</li> <li> Load bags to capacity</li> <li> Avoid double bagging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Bag only on request</li> <li> Ask if customers need a bag</li> <li> Restructure picking logic to reduce number of bags used</li> <li> Include messaging at self-checkout to prompt customers to bring their own bag</li> <li> Diversify reusable bag sizes to meet customer needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Charge legislative fee* to disincentivize single use</li> <li> Charge corporate fee to disincentivize single use</li> <li> Reconfigure checkout fixture to orient to bagging with reusable bags</li> </ul>
Lower priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Thank customers for bringing their own bag</li> <li> Place reusable bag fixtures at or near point of sale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Diversify reusable bag design, pricing &amp; form factor to meet different customer needs</li> <li> Encourage use of reusable bags with charitable donations</li> <li> Encourage use of reusable bags with raffle entry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Provide loyalty incentive to encourage use of reusable bags</li> <li> Provide financial incentive to encourage use of reusable bags</li> <li> Use geofenced digital reminders</li> <li> Design standalone fixtures to merchandise reusable bags</li> </ul>

\*Note: Legislative fees require a different time-frame to implementation and involvement from multiple stakeholders



## COMMUNICATIONS

Deploy engaging communications strategies that leverage multiple touchpoints, both in store and out, to inform, influence and reinforce customer behavior.

- **LEVERAGE SIGNAGE TO INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR.** Use wording that connects consumer behavior to the norms of a larger group, combined with a customized “thank you.” This has been proven to reduce the number of bags customers use (e.g., “Shoppers in this store believe that re-using shopping bags is a worthwhile way to help the environment,” coupled with “We thank you for helping the environment by continuing to reuse your bags.”).
- **INCLUDE MESSAGING AT SELF-CHECKOUT.** Ask customers how many bags they have brought and how many bags they need today at self-checkout kiosks. This prompts customers to consider how many bags they truly need and potentially consolidate items.
- **USE GEOFENCED DIGITAL REMINDERS.** Deploy strategies such as geofencing to allow retailers to send push notifications to customers’ phones when they are near a participating store to remind them to bring their own bag.
- **INFORM CUSTOMERS WITH SIGNAGE.** Place simplified signage with clear messaging at key moments along the customer’s journey to capture attention – in the parking lot, at front of store and/or checkout – and inform customers about changes happening in store.
- **AMPLIFY IN THE MEDIA.** Use targeted communications to influence customers to adopt a desired behavior change (e.g., in partnership with an influencer who is relevant to the target customer segment for the campaign, show images or videos on social media of an influencer’s everyday routine including them bringing their own reusable bag so that customers can visualize this behavior in the context of their own lives).







COMMUNICATIONS  
CASE STUDY

## Connecting Language to a Broader Social Norm

A retailer tested different language on signage in-store to see what best influenced customer behavior to bring reusable bags. Below are the findings from the tests, showing that the combination of language in Sign C was most effective. This language was found to reduce single-use bag consumption by 40%.

*Sign A*

### GOOD

Shoppers in this store believe that re-using shopping bags is a worthwhile way to help the environment.

Please continue to re-use your bags.

*States local beliefs/norms on bag behaviors*

*Sign B*

### BETTER

We thank you for helping the environment by continuing to re-use your bags.

*Thanks customer for bag behaviors*

*Sign C*

### BEST

Shoppers in this store believe that re-using shopping bags is a worthwhile way to help the environment.

We thank you for helping the environment by continuing to reuse your bags.

*Combines messaging from sign A and sign B*



## EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Educate and provide store employees with clear bagging standards and prompts to position them as advocates, leading change and influencing customers to use fewer bags or bring their own.

- **LOAD TO CAPACITY.** Coach employees on the strength of the bag, encouraging team members to load to capacity and fill bags completely so that fewer bags are needed.
- **AVOID DOUBLE BAGGING.** Establish a straightforward store policy that stops double bagging and implement a no bag list simultaneously; some heavy items that would typically be double bagged (e.g., laundry detergent) can go without a bag altogether.
- **RESTRUCTURE PICKING LOGIC.** Restructure picking logic to orient towards reducing the total number of bags during order fulfillment and utilize an order management system to analyze orders against store layouts to determine the routes that most efficiently batch orders.

### SAMPLE PROMPTS

**THANK YOU** for bringing your own bag!

**WE APPRECIATE YOU** for bringing your own bag!

Thank you for bringing in your own bags. Last month our store had a 20% reduction in plastic bags. Our target is 25%, so **THANKS FOR HELPING US GET CLOSER TO OUR GOAL!**

- **EXPLORE CUSTOMER VALIDATION.**
  - **ASK IF CUSTOMERS NEED A BAG.** Employees should ask customers instead of assuming they want a bag. The Consortium's research has shown some customers are nervous to tell an employee they do not want a bag.
  - **THANK CUSTOMERS WHO BRING THEIR OWN BAG.** Provide positive reinforcement, contribute to repeated behavior and encourage customer engagement by thanking customers who bring their own bags and share the company's bag goals or broader commitment to sustainability.
- **TRAIN EMPLOYEES TO ENCOURAGE REUSE.** Train employees to ask customers if they'd like to purchase a reusable bag – instead of offering a single-use bag – if they recognize a customer did not bring a bag and it appears they will need one based on basket size. Note, only do this if the necessary infrastructure and incentives are in place to ensure reuse actually takes place.
- **PROVIDE BAG ONLY ON REQUEST.** Make not offering single-use bags unless a customer requests one the norm. The Consortium's research has shown customers can be too embarrassed to decline a bag even when they did not want one in the first place. In particular, avoid bagging for small orders (1-3 items) unless requested.
- **IDENTIFY NO BAG ITEMS.** Place a "cheat sheet" in the view of both customers and employees (e.g., the bagging area at both assisted and self-checkout) that includes clear imagery of items that due to their size or shape don't need a bag.



APPAREL & HOME

**Existing handles:**  
Laundry basket

**Items already in a bag:**  
Comforter

**Large or oddly-shaped items:**  
Wall mirror  
Lamp  
Carpet

**Small items:**  
Hair clip  
Jewelry



BEAUTY

**Small items:**  
Lip products  
Mascara  
Eyebrow pencil/eyeliner



GROCERY & GEN. MERCH.

**Existing handles:**  
Milk jugs  
Laundry detergent  
Bleach

**Large or oddly-shaped items:**  
Toilet paper  
Paper towels  
Tissue box packs

**Durable items:**  
Pet food bags  
Charcoal

**Items that come in their own bag:**  
Snack-sized chips, etc.  
Bagged potatoes

**Small items:**  
Pack of gum  
Candy  
Gift card



SPORTS & OUTDOORS

**Existing handles:**  
Bag for sports equipment  
Backpack  
Fishing tackle box

**Large or oddly-shaped items:**  
Fishing pole  
Sleeping bag

**Durable items:**  
Sports balls (e.g., basketball, volleyball)  
Bicycle helmet



CONVENIENCE

**Small items:**  
Pack of gum  
Small candy items  
Gift card



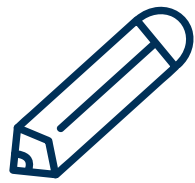


EMPLOYEE TRAINING  
CASE STUDY

## Batching orders sustainably

A national mass retailer restructured their in-store picking logic to prioritize bag reduction in order fulfillment by revising the picking algorithm to more effectively batch orders. Instead of other perishable grocery items, retail employees were asked to pick dry grocery items with general merchandise. With no impact on the 90-minute internal picking window or the two-minute order delivery window for curbside pickup, the new picking logic saved \$1.8M in payroll costs and \$200k in single-use bag spend.





## BAG & FIXTURE DESIGN

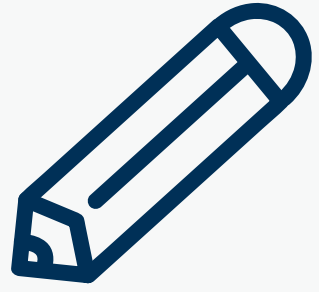
Provide an assortment of designs, sizes and price points for reusable bags and leverage fixture design and placement to meet diverse customer needs, make reusable bags more visible to customers during times of need, help them internalize the value of the bag and implicitly signal reusable bag usage is the norm.

**\*Important note:** Selling more reusable bags is not the ultimate goal; rather the goal is to equip customers with the reusable bags they need and support them to reuse the bags they own. It's important to implement complementary interventions that support customers to bring their own bags back into store.

- **DIVERSIFY REUSABLE BAGS.** Right size the mix of reusable bags that are carried to match the product mix. This can be done by analyzing itemized transaction data to identify common purchase patterns (e.g., customers most commonly purchasing one pair of shoes and one piece of apparel, or three small cosmetic items).
  - **DESIGN.** Connect to customers by tailoring reusable bag designs to diverse aesthetics and interests (e.g., artist collaborations, seasonal themes, sustainability themes).
  - **FORM FACTOR.** Merchandise an assortment of reusable bags that cater to the store's average basket size and composition as well as the occasion (e.g., apparel, grocery, curbside, delivery, food to-go).
  - **PRICING.** Price reusable bags accessibly and in such a way that customers internalize the value of the product, viewing a reusable bag as durable not disposable.

- **MAXIMIZE PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE & COMPELLING FIXTURES.**
  - **PLACEMENT.** Place reusable bag fixtures at or near point of sale to make it easy for customers to use a reusable bag at checkout. Minimize customers accidentally filling bags without paying for them by putting larger tags on bags, using colors that make the tags stand out and placing price labels on reusable bags.
  - **CHECKOUT DESIGN.** Reconfigure or replace legacy checkout fixtures to incorporate a flat platform and ancillary space that is oriented to bagging with reusable bags.
  - **MERCHANDISING DESIGN.** Display reusable bags prominently with encouraging signage and design standalone fixtures to allow for vertical hanging on side panels and horizontal stacking of bags to showcase the bags while maximizing storage. Beyond making bags available for customers, this also helps signal that they can use reusable bags in that location.





DESIGN  
CASE STUDY

## Leveraging environmental holidays and events

A national retailer launched a reusable bag campaign in recognition of Earth Month, commissioning custom bag artwork that combined sustainability and inclusivity messaging. The bag was sold in-store and online, and marketed via social media and on the retailer's website homepage. The retailer also offered a loyalty program benefit (approximately \$3 in rewards) to incentivize customers to purchase the bag. Demand was so high that the 10,000 bags allocated to e-commerce sold out in one week. Adoption of reusable bags is a critical first step in the journey to reduce single-use bag waste, and must be complemented with the necessary infrastructure and incentives to ensure that these bags continue to get reused.





## CUSTOMER INCENTIVES

Use incentives and fees to motivate customers to bring their own bags more frequently.

- **CONSIDER FEES TO DISCOURAGE SINGLE-USE BAGS.**
  - **LEGISLATIVE FEE.** Factor in costs to cover technology changes, tracking and training to support a fee program, as government-mandated single-use bag fees are on the rise.
  - **CORPORATE FEE.** Implement a single-use bag fee to decrease bag consumption, then donate the proceeds to a charity partner or reinvest them back into sustainability initiatives within the organization.
- **CONSIDER INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE BRINGING YOUR OWN BAG.**
  - **FINANCIAL INCENTIVE.** Retailers can implement financial incentives at traditional checkout and/or self-checkout through customer prompts (e.g., \$0.05-\$0.10 credit per bag) and apply discounts directly to receipts to positively reinforce the behavior of bringing your own bag.
  - **LOYALTY INCENTIVE.** Apply a reusable bag loyalty incentive – such as points, coupons or financial credits – through an existing loyalty program and track and communicate progress through the company app if one exists (e.g., share “total bags saved” for the individual customer and by other customers in their community).

- **CHARITABLE DONATION.** Offer to make a charitable donation for each reusable bag used. Look for charitable partners who are aligned with the company’s broader mission and offerings and decide whether it will be an implicit or opt-in donation.
- **RAFFLE ENTRY.** Give customers who bring their own bag a raffle ticket that enters them into a drawing for a publicly announced award.

### FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCENTIVES

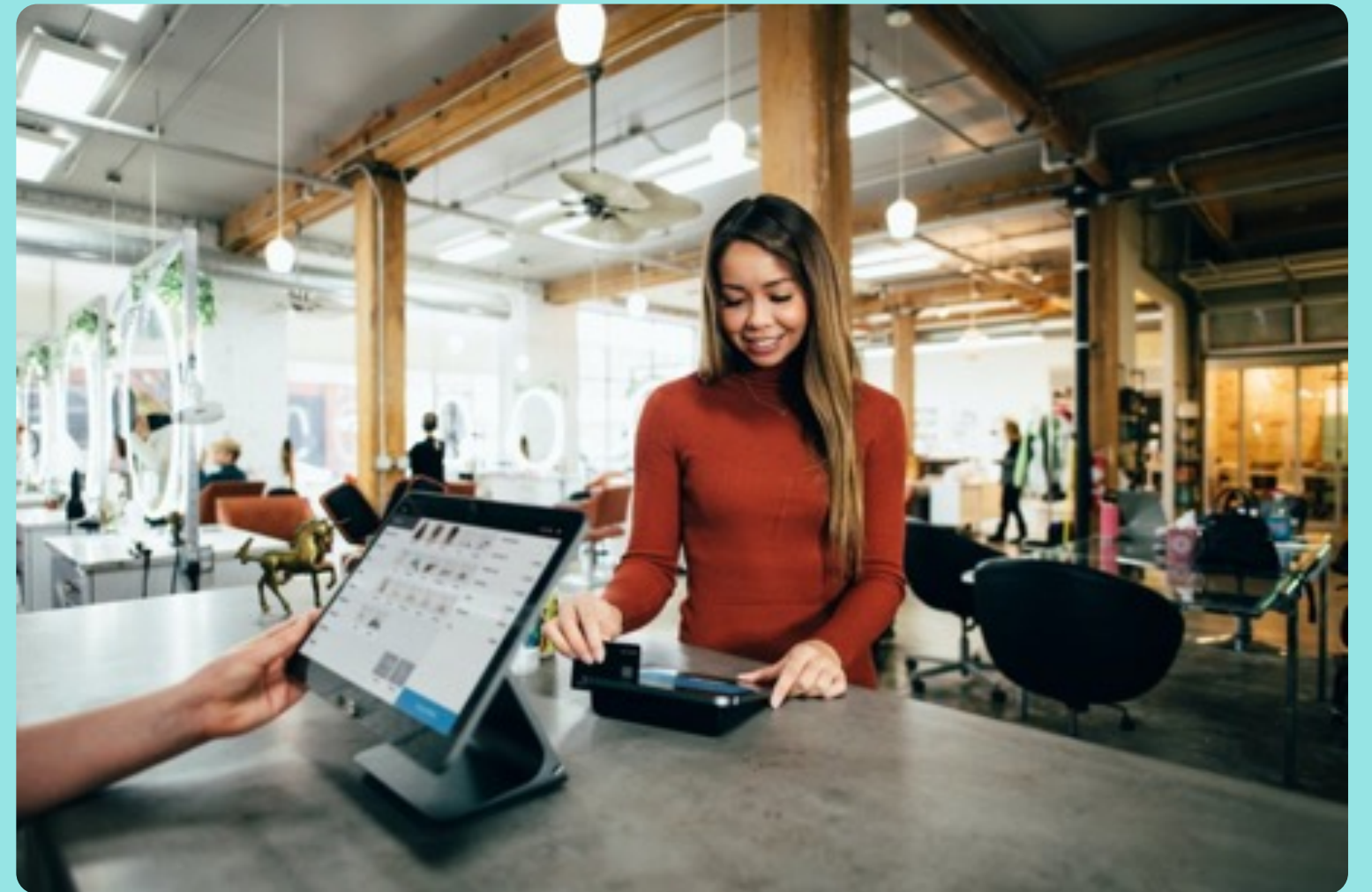
- Customers typically expect incentives to continue, which makes them difficult to remove
- Costs of incentives can make them more difficult for retailers to keep in place in perpetuity



CUSTOMER  
INCENTIVES  
CASE STUDY

## Embedding bring your own bag rewards

A regional retailer introduced an incentive program offering a credit for customers with the option to either apply the \$0.05 reusable bag credit toward their purchase OR donate the \$0.05 reusable bag credit to the retailer's charity partners. Following rollout, the retailer observed that 80% of customers chose to donate the credit to charity. This prompted the retailer to transition the incentive to an implicit donation by automatically applying the credit towards donations, rather than offering it back to the customer. This transition increased from 80% "bring your own bag" donations to 100% and results were anecdotally very positive.





## WHAT WE LEARNED TOGETHER

Key insights to move the industry forward collectively surfaced from retailers that contributed to the playbook, including:

- **ALIGNING THE STRATEGIC APPROACH WITH BROADER COMPANY GOALS MAXIMIZES IMPACT.** A retailer's strategic approach to bag reduction and encouraging customers to bring their own bags must align internally with overall company goals (not limited to sustainability) and externally with its customer base, strategic partners and the legislation of the markets in which it serves.
- **GAINING TOP-DOWN SUPPORT DRIVES SUCCESS.** The number one driver of success cited by respondents is the presence of supporting state, federal and/or local policy. Other key success factors are "support from leadership" and "support and positive feedback from customers."
- **MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS BUILDS TRUST AND SUPPORT.** Retailers that measure and show the impact of their bag reduction efforts are able to leverage traction to gain executive buy-in and sponsorship. Sharing successes (and failures) is equally as important in building a knowledge base to support subsequent initiatives.
- **MAINTAINING A GROWTH MINDSET MOVES THE NEEDLE.** Those starting out should take small steps first to build momentum, and leaders should continue to innovate, test and scale to push the envelope. Failures should always be viewed as opportunities to learn and grow.

- **COLLABORATING ACROSS THE VALUE CHAIN CREATES A RIPPLE EFFECT.** Creating meaningful impact often requires multiple action-oriented approaches working in tandem. This impact can be amplified when retailers work together to learn from one another, and partner together in an industry-wide effort to reduce single-use bags, increase bag reuse and create systems-level change.
- **BEING BOLD CAN PAY OFF.** Proactively implementing bag reduction efforts prior to government mandates can reflect positively on a retailer by positioning it as a market leader in sustainability. Systems change does not happen overnight, so first movers should prioritize transparency in stating their mission, vision, process and progress. Taking customers "along for the ride" as retailers develop a strategy for bag reduction continually orients people toward the broader goal of cutting single-use plastic waste.



## HOW RETAILERS CAN GET INVOLVED

The Center for the Circular Economy convenes leading brands to tackle complex material challenges. In addition to launching the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag and its “Beyond the Bag” Initiative in 2020, we launched the NextGen Consortium in 2018, convening leading food and beverage companies, including McDonald’s and Starbucks, to identify and help scale widely recyclable, compostable and/or reusable foodservice packaging solutions. These groundbreaking, pre-competitive collaborations work across the value chain, building an ecosystem that connects entrepreneurs, industry experts, global consumer goods companies, technology companies, material science companies, retailers, financial institutions and municipalities.

The Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag is currently comprised of 15 retailers representing more than 50,000 stores. While this is a significant share of the market, there are more than one million brick-and-mortar retail stores in the U.S. alone. We hope insights from this playbook help engage many more retailers – from small local stores to large national brands.

The more retailers that participate, the more impact is made in shaping customers’ daily shopping behaviors. As these behaviors become more commonplace, efficiencies will increase in both the employee and customer experience surrounding bag reduction and reuse solutions – thus accelerating impact.

### JOIN US

If you are a retailer interested in participating in a collaborative effort to identify and scale the most viable and impactful bag reduction and reuse strategies, we invite you to join the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag to gain full access to our research, insights and continued in-market experimentation. Learn more on our website [here](#) or email [beyondthebag@closedlooppartners.com](mailto:beyondthebag@closedlooppartners.com) to inquire about how we can help you bring these key learnings and recommendations to life in the field. Also, if you are a retailer who has tried solutions and want to share your insights with us, please reach out to us by email.



# MANY THANKS TO EVERYONE INVOLVED

The playbook is the result of the Consortium to Reinvent the Retail Bag's joint efforts to make an impact by working across the retail value chain to reduce single-use plastic bags. Bag reduction strategies and solutions were sourced from the world's leading retailers, including Consortium members and others. Experts from Closed Loop Partners led the creation of the playbook, supported by retail consultancy, McMillanDoolittle, who performed secondary research, 50+ surveys, 20+ interviews, as well as contributed to the production of the original document. Thank you to Consortium members and each retailer that participated in its creation. This resource is a testament to your leadership.

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