

Living a low-waste life offers a business opportunity

By **Janelle Nanos** Globe Staff, August 12, 2019, 7:32 p.m.





Sarah Levy (left) worked with customer Helena Hughes at Levy's store, Cleanland, in Cambridge. She weighed Hughes's reusable containers before filling them. (SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF)

CAMBRIDGE — On a recent afternoon, Sarah Levy picked up an empty pickle jar from a shelf in her storefront, sniffed it, and then suggested a customer fill it with soap. There's a take-a-jar, leave-a-jar policy at [Cleanland](#), Levy's new "low-waste, no-shame" store that lets shoppers stock up on cleaning supplies using their own bottles. And as an early adopter of an emerging shift in American consumption habits, she has become adept at getting the gherkin smell out of glass.

"This is not a trend; it's a resurgence of interest in re-using instead of recycling," said Levy, who opened Cleanland in Central Square in June. After weighing her customers' jars, she commiserates with them over global environmental challenges.

"We're not going to recycle our way out of this problem," said Ksenija Broks, a teacher from Roslindale.

As consumers such as Broks seek to limit the waste they create, more local entrepreneurs like Levy are stepping in to serve them and have begun opening storefronts — physical, mobile, and online.

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[The Boston General Store](#) is selling a growing assortment of zero-waste accessories. [Make & Mend](#) sells secondhand arts and crafts supplies in Somerville's Bow Market. The [Green Road Refill](#) bus tours Cape Cod selling plastic-free alternatives to home and body products. Last month, Sabrina Auclair launched [Unpacked Living](#), an online storefront that she says is the only plastic-free store in Massachusetts.

Recent changes in the Chinese recycling industry have upended the way America deals with waste. China had processed US recyclables for decades but is now rejecting “foreign garbage” as part of a broader national antipollution campaign. The decision has reverberated in municipalities across the United States, forcing Massachusetts authorities to place new restrictions on materials they accept curbside in recycling bins. In so doing, it's also forced more consumers to [reconsider the amount of waste they create](#).

Julia Wilson, who tracks corporate sustainability efforts for the Nielsen research firm, says 73 percent of consumers are looking to shift their consumption habits to reduce their environmental impact, and she predicts that they'll spend \$150 billion on sustainable goods by 2021. Young consumers in particular lack the brand loyalty of their parents, she said, meaning they're willing to make purchase decisions that align with their values. And that presents an opportunity.

“It opens the door for new entrepreneurs and upstart products and brands who are thinking about things differently,” she said.

Some entrepreneurs are using a “circular economy” model in which goods are delivered in durable packages and sent back when they're empty. Boston-based [ThreeMain](#) launched earlier this year selling cleaning products in reusable aluminum bottles. The

most well-funded endeavor, [Loop](#), which expanded to Massachusetts last month, sells 100 major brands including Haagen Dazs, Crest mouthwash, and Clorox wipes in reusable containers.



Re-usable glass jars are available at Cleenland, in Cambridge's Central Square. (SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF)

Tom Szaky has spent over 17 years processing hard-to-recycle materials as the founder of TerraCycle, and said the challenges in the recycling economy led him to launch Loop. “Waste has really moved from a problem to a crisis in the last 24 months,” he said. “And the real root cause of waste is the idea of disposability, which was really only invented in the 1950s.”

Loop’s goal, he said, is to make buying items in durable, reusable containers as “incredibly convenient and incredibly affordable” as the ones we’re currently buying — and tossing — when we’re through. “Our goal is that it feels to you as disposable as possible,” he said. “I want you to feel like it’s a throwaway lifestyle.”

The service has been operating in Paris and New York for the past few months and will have as many as 500 products by the year’s end, Szaky said. Partnerships with Kroger

and Walgreen stores will launch next year.

To the enlightened observer, these entrepreneurs aren't so much trying to reinvent commerce as they are trying to take it back to a more traditional form of selling goods.

Levy recognizes the difficulty involved with changing consumer habits, but she said the model works because she's selling necessities. "You don't go a week without hand soap," she notes. And she's hopeful, as the popularity of zero-waste shops has [exploded abroad in the United Kingdom](#), Canada, and particularly in Australia, where the nonprofit Plastic Free Foundation launched the [#PlasticFreeJuly campaign](#), which has become a global phenomenon.

Auclair's path to entrepreneurship started in the shampoo aisle of a Market Basket. The Colombia native has lived in Massachusetts for over a decade and grew to hate the American habit of buying everything in plastic. Because her apartment building in Beverly doesn't recycle, she felt frustrated by the amount of waste she created.

"If I buy a shampoo plastic bottle, I'm buying trash," she said, recalling her Market Basket revelation. "I vowed that day that I was going to quit plastic."

Auclair found a community of like-minded consumers online and began to document her attempt to live plastic-free on Instagram. She created the Facebook group Zero Waste Massachusetts before launching [Unpacked Living](#). The site sells such items as bamboo toothbrushes, metal lunch tins, and lip balms in cardboard containers. It's a small endeavor — she has invested about \$2,000 on the products, and her warehouse is her guest bedroom — but she said it's a start.

Area food suppliers say concerns about plastic waste are driving a steady increase in bulk buying, particularly following the closure of the Harvest Co-op last year. Matt Gray has seen sales of his bulk section and bottled milk soar in his Somerville storefront, [Neighborhood Produce](#). Alys Myers is working to build Supply, a bulk delivery business out of Dorchester, and Roche Bros. recently added a bulk section in its Downtown Crossing store. And since taking over the store's operations last summer,

Greg Saidnawey, the 26-year-old fourth-generation owner of [Pemberton Farms](#) market in North Cambridge, said he has doubled the amount of items the store sells (it now offers 120 bulk bins, 65 spices, three oils, four soap products, six pet foods, and 12 beverages).

“The demand was there,” he said, “and we took the opportunity and ran with it.”

Gergana Nenkov, a marketing professor at Boston College who studies how consumers engage with messages around sustainability, said these entrepreneurs are responding to the shifting attitudes of younger consumers. “There’s a big concern about ‘What are you doing for the world?’ ” she said, a message that “startups are leading the way on, and big companies will follow.”

Until then, for consumers like Julia Burrell, living a low-waste life can still feel a lot like a full-time job. In January, the self-described “environmental atrocity” made a decision to rid her life of plastic, documenting her effort on Instagram as [The Crazy No Plastic Lady](#). It’s still hard to buy meat and cheese in plastic-free packaging, she said, and she’s been slapped on the wrist while attempting to use her own containers in the bulk aisle of such stores as Whole Foods. “Living this lifestyle requires a lot of research,” she said, sitting in front of a collection of empty glass jars that line the mantel of her East Boston home. “And a lot of seeing what you can get away with.”

But Burrell is hoping her Instagram account might lead to a new career coaching organizations on taking steps toward reducing their waste. “If I focus my energies into this, I think I could parlay this into a successful business,” she said. “It would be the most meaningful job I have ever had.”

Janelle Nanos can be reached at janelle.nanos@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@janellenanos](https://twitter.com/janellenanos).

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38 Comments

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**benn12**

8/12/19 - 9:20PM

I definitely missed #plastic free july.
This is to hard. Loop, I clicked their website and looked like a saturday night live skit.
Buy local, recycle what I can, though the article says that recycling isn't even getting recycled now? what is up with that!!!

**cantbreath**

8/12/19 - 10:15PM

My plan is to go at it one thing at a time. The other day I found tide powder in a cardboard box. Cardboard has a high recycle rate.
Once I am near the end of what I have I will look into a shampoo bar or will just try soap.
Eggs! I want to buy cage free and they are all in a single use plastic carton instead of cardboard.
Will not buy lettuce in plastic carton.
I just do not want to participate in the national plastic orgggy.

**Numeral**

8/12/19 - 11:45PM

Cant - even if it's not recycled cardboard is biodegradable.

**idoubtit**

8/12/19 - 10:35PM

My daughter says all the "recycled" products you separate from your trash and think are being recycled are just combined with your trash and thrown into a landfill.

**cantbreath**

8/12/19 - 11:03PM

Something is going on. 9 percent of plastic is recycled.

**Weaselina**

8/13/19 - 8:01AM

Our country definitely needs to take recycling more seriously, as the landfills are full and we are out of space to dump our obscene amounts of trash.

Sweden is burning trash for energy. BMW is powering some plants with recycled waste. But here we are, the dying dinosaur of a formerly dynamic and forward thinking industrial nation, doing just nothing.

[Show all 5 replies](#)

**Numeral**

8/12/19 - 11:42PM

Until this is the normal way to do business we will still be burying ourselves in plastic.

**user_3270922**

8/13/19 - 10:43AM

Gotta start somewhere.

**Goldsky**

8/13/19 - 2:22AM

I have used Dropps laundry pods and dryer balls for two years and like them very much. One box each month.

Small steps towards zero waste. Glad to hear bigger stores are taking this seriously.



[user_1700434](#)

8/13/19 - 5:34AM

We do our best but until more businesses get on board it is hard to conceive giving up products like laundry detergent and soap that you have a high confidence level in for something you don't.



[smartcookie2](#)

8/13/19 - 6:22AM

I recently switched to a bar shampoo and it works very well. The same company makes a mouthwash in tablet form you dissolve in a glass of water. I just got some but haven't tried it yet. I'm finishing up what I hope will be my last bottle of Listerine.



[Mauiblue](#)

8/13/19 - 7:06AM

Love the idea and I try everyday to do without plastic..would there ever be a time when we can get rid of trash bags? I think twice when I pull one out but it is hard! Nice to know others are trying as well. I carry a ball jar in my car with water..



[IsobelC](#)

8/13/19 - 10:44AM

All is not lost! Biodegradable trashbags have been available or several years, at places like Whole Foods, the late lamented Harvest, Pemberton Farms, even Star Market.

**Mauiblua**

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**BShai6**

8/13/19 - 7:14AM

Cantbreath (Maybe you mean cantbreathe>) Anyway I buy cage free eggs in a cardboard container from Stop and Shop. Check out Market Basket for their huge number of egg brands. I don't go to farmers' markets, but I wonder if you did save the plastic containers, if you could just use/reuse them with eggs you buy from these farms. As an aside, I save them cut off the tops and fill the containers with small items like earrings.

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This comment has been blocked.

**Wise Women Win**

8/13/19 - 7:17AM

On vacation in the Berkshires I went into a supermarket to buy some veggies. They didn't have the see-thru plastic bags, but instead green compostable ones.

Since then I have bringing my used plastic see-thru veggie bags back to my local Market Basket (after all, they're pretty clean if they've only held an eggplant or a few (peaches)



fordpem

8/13/19 - 8:19AM

Does Market Basket take them? What do they do with them, tape them back on the dispenser roll? I wouldn't want your used bags. I literally don't know where they've been or what was in them.



seku99

8/13/19 - 8:40AM

I use cloth veggie bags sold by Plow & Hearth which are washable and therefore reusable. You could sew a similar drawstring bag from netting. The bags are thin and light-weight so don't add to the weight of the produce when checking out. Highly recommend them.

[Show all 4 replies](#)



ptrespas

8/13/19 - 7:39AM

Don't buy Egglard's Best eggs. They come in styrofoam packaging. When in produce dept. I don't put all my fruits/ veggies in separate plastic bags. Use one if u have to, or none, even better.

Btw: why can't the plastic industry step up and do something? It is infuriating to me that in the 21st century they can't figure out how to make a degradable product.



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**Dm1120**

8/13/19 - 7:54AM

I'd love to use only reusable containers for everything but the reality is that cleaning them out isn't so great either. Lots of wasted water and energy used to properly clean glass containers over and over again.

**Harmonicat**

8/13/19 - 10:15AM

When we're in the midst of lots of rainy weather I feel less badly when cleaning out reusable glass jars for reuse. You can put a tub or bucket under the faucet as you do it, then use that bucket of water to flush the toilet.

**mitrefcp5**

8/13/19 - 8:46AM

Boston and MA need to step up. (I'm talking about Marty and no-vision Baker). Time to ban single use plastics. We did it with trash bags and the world didn't end. We've live for 100,000 years without plastic and did just fine. "Life, finds a way" -- Jurassic Park.

**Mulridge**

8/13/19 - 8:49AM

Trader Joe's uses compostable plastic bags for fruits and veggies. Roche Bros have gone to paper bags in their stores but deliver food in huge plastic bags. Time for them to rethink that.



kaisy

8/13/19 - 11:00AM

Lynn has banned plastic bags effective 9/1.



kaisy

8/13/19 - 11:00AM

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[Show all 3 replies](#)

seku99

8/13/19 - 8:58AM

I have gone back to using Tide powder laundry detergent to avoid both the plastic and paying for their adding water. This product has been available for

decades and works perfectly well. Consumers have been hoodwinked into thinking they need so many varieties of products - for heavens sake, the basic forms worked perfectly fine for your parents & grandparents. I don't recall ever hearing/reading that "too bad in the (fill in decades) people had to wear clothes with stains and smells - If only we had good cleaners". These days everyone wants a personalized type of product: special floral fragrances, w. whitener, low suds, original fragrance, color-block, w. bleach etc, etc, etc, many of which = more chemicals.

I recall some food items such as cottage cheese and sour cream coming in the same type waxed coated paper containers as Brussels sprouts are sold and that worked fine. In my house just getting rid of those type of containers would be helpful.

I make my own yogurt to avoid yet another plastic container and abhor the culture of individualized containers: 10 little yogurt plastic cups instead of one that you portion out into reusable storage containers and flavor separately. Who needs individually wrapped prunes - in foil packets, no less! At least get one large container and use a reusable mini container or was paper (great product!)to wrap it in.

We are a lazy culture and we are paying for this selfish attitude of personalized choices by the abundance of trash.



Omj66

8/13/19 - 9:47AM

I receive so much unwanted paper advertising and it then becomes my towns duty to get rid of it.

Make the advertisers dispose of it!



MaryVincent

8/13/19 - 10:26AM

Is having a glass bottle in the shower really such a great idea?



scalawag124

8/13/19 - 11:34AM

I know this is a tad off topic but Sarah certainly does have beautiful legs.

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