

Sustainable solutions to overconsumption challenges in modern marketing

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Professor of Marketing at the Anderson School of Management, Catherine Roster, provides insight into the marketing world of overconsumption and a shift in mindset to sustainability long-term.

Roster, along with her colleague Joseph Ferrari, a psychologist at DePaul University, co-authored a [research article](#) published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* where they discovered that clutter has a strong negative relationship with people's feelings of well-being and their psychological sense of home, which reflects a person's feelings about home being a safe refuge.

While marketing plays a significant role in encouraging consumers to consume.

"Marketing is not all about constantly pushing people to acquire things, although there's this perception of that. We, as consumers, are part of the problem and must become part of the solution to the bigger societal issues surrounding sustainability by making changes to our consumption habits. We simply cannot keep up the pace of consumption that we've had in the last several decades without doing significant harm to our environment," Roster said.

Marketers are increasingly making consumers' well-being part of their sustainability efforts by finding ways to help consumers take care of the planet while taking care of their needs. "Even in consumers' own lives, we've become cognizant of the fact that happiness is not defined by the things you have," Roster said.

Roster gave examples of companies that have taken steps to help improve clothing sustainability efforts. For example, Men's Wearhouse hosts an annual drive to collect donations of gently used professional attire that they give to unemployed Americans.

Even stores like H&M, which have been accused of promoting "fast fashion," offer take-back bins where consumers can drop off unwanted clothing so that it can be reused or recycled. "While it's not the total solution for the environment because we still ultimately need to stop the

overconsumption, it is a start," Roster said.

Roster proposes this question in her [sustainability research](#): "What if we can extend the lives of things in a useful manner? We can't recycle our way out of the damage our overconsumption is doing to the environment, but we can foster ways to keep things out of landfills that promote both consumers' self-interests and their well-being.

"If we can find secondary uses for goods, for instance, by repurposing them, sharing, or getting them to proper secondary markets instead of always buying new, it will lead to a better environment for all. We have to understand that there is nothing wrong with consumers wanting or needing things—but they do not always have to be newly created, just new to them," said Roster.

"While things and possessions can bring happiness and are an important part of the identity-building process, it is important to recognize that things have a permanency and that they need to be able to continue their lives in another way; as consumers, we are responsible for that," said Roster. "We have to stop throwing perfectly good things into the landfill. We have to learn how to do a better job of repurposing things and find more efficient and environmentally responsible ways of recycling."

Roster's recent research examples how consumers creatively upcycle their possessions and find ways to extend the lives of things that they already own. She says that marketers can play a role by helping to encourage consumers to give things up, especially clothing and some of these other common categories for overconsumption. "We need to do some correction in marketplaces where there is both an overproduction and overconsumption economy," she said.

Marketers are also analyzing packaging waste and considering how packaging can be transformed into other things or other uses. Some

companies, like Amazon, are reducing their packaging and considering how they can make their packaging so that it is easier for customers to recycle or dispose of through curbside recycling programs.

Roster is now focusing the majority of her research on overconsumption and sustainability. About her research on e-waste, she says, "It's a very big problem. Some of our data shows that as much as 60-70% of consumers have drawers and attics full of electronics ranging from earbuds to cables to old devices. My research shows that the biggest majority of people do not know what to do with their old electronics," she explained.

There is not an accessible general place that is close enough for consumers to properly and safely recycle electronics. "This is not just a consumer problem, but this is a problem that we have to deal with as a waste disposal issue in our country," Roster said.

While consumers are confused about where to dispose of these electronics properly, Roster explains that there are places that will take them, but marketers need to make it easier and do a better job in terms of refurbishing some of these electronics.

"One of the problems with a lot of these electronics is extracting what is valuable out of it for recycling purposes actually takes more resources and that creates a new problem. It can take more resources to recycle a lot of these things than to repurpose it," Roster said.

One of the ways marketers play a critical role is by marketing to consumers with ideas about how to recycle these electronics. For instance, Samsung encourages consumers to turn their old smartphones into baby or pet monitors. "We're going to have to be creative with this because a lot of these electronics contain materials that can become dangerous to the environment and people's health if they are not

disposed of correctly," she explained.

"We used to send a lot of those things, like electronics, overseas, and now we're getting shut down in some of those places, and rightfully so. It's a problem that we're going to have to reckon with as a country from a waste management perspective," said Roster.

While grappling with overconsumption is a pressing issue for marketers and for consumers, Roster emphasizes that there is a positive outcome on the horizon. By practicing sustainable recycling and repurposing of items and decluttering, in general Roster's research shows that "people felt more empowered and they increased their positive emotions. Being mindful of what we consume and what we produce can lead to greater happiness for [consumers](#), a healthier planet, and higher profits for business."

Provided by University of New Mexico

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