

Modern milkman: Company offers delivery and pickup of no-waste household supplies and groceries

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It's the stuff everyone tries to get rid of but that never really goes away:

Hard-to-wash-out shampoo bottles, paper ice-cream tubs you can't recycle, crinkly [plastic](#) cereal bags—the stuff that fills our trash cans, clogs our waterways, and ends up in floating, toxic masses in the ocean.

With global attention on the problem of plastic, a New Jersey-based company is hoping it can revolutionize how consumers deal with such waste, making old-school new again with Loop, a sustainable delivery service across the globe.

The concept behind Loop is simple: Get name-brand household goods and foods delivered to your door—but in glass and metal packaging. When empty, the bottles and containers are picked up, refilled, and sent to another customer. New supplies land at your house, delivered by UPS in a reusable—not cardboard—box.

It's the milkman for the 21st Century, with customers from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia already having placed online orders this spring. Founder and CEO Tom Szaky, who spun Loop off from his Trenton recycling company TerraCycle, believes this is the right moment for a new way of grocery shopping.

"People are really fed up with garbage. Whether it's outlawing a plastic straw or [plastic bag](#), people want to live in a world where they're not surrounded by disposable everything," said Szaky, 37, a Budapest-born Princeton dropout who founded TerraCycle while in college and now lives in Mercer County, Titusville, N. J.

Debate and research about what to do about [single-use plastics](#) has intensified; state legislatures have considered and in some cases passed bills aimed at limiting plastic and single-use products. Meanwhile, modern grocery delivery has become mainstream with services like Instacart and AmazonFresh. And consumers, often looking for sustainable alternatives, are willing to change their habits.

"We've already retrained people to just bring their own bags to the grocery stores (And) it was literally overnight that people just said, 'Yeah, you're right, I don't need a straw,'" said Susan Dobscha, a marketing professor at Bentley University in Massachusetts who studies sustainability and consumer habits. "Consumers are clamoring for a one-stop solution that allows them to shop their values without being so complicated, so something like Loop, I think, really does present a really interesting market opportunity."

Consumers concerned about reports of trash in the oceans and microplastics in drinking water are also

pressuring companies to change, said Graham Forbes, global project leader on plastics for Greenpeace. But environmentalists argue that companies need to make shift away from plastic completely to have a meaningful impact on the environment. While Greenpeace has said it "welcomes the aims" of Loop, it said many of the participating suppliers are also "expanding production of single-use plastic and looking to grow."

The Loop concept is a positive "as an alternative delivery model to the broken single-use culture that we're currently embedded in," Forbes said, "but we need to see companies like a Walmart, like a Nestle, go much further in setting reuse targets as part of a comprehensive plan to reduce the total amount of plastic that they produce."

Loop launched in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, and D.C. recently, and in Paris, France earlier in May. Here, customers can buy Haagen-Dazs ice cream in metal tubs; Hidden Valley ranch dressing in glass; and Pantene shampoo in aluminum pump bottles. Other brands include Tide, Clorox, and Crest, and Loop also offers bulk pantry items and toiletries like deodorant and toothbrushes.

In addition to the pickup and delivery service, Loop is partnering with Walgreens and Kroger, where customers will be able to buy and drop off the products in-store. Almost all of Loop's products come in aluminum, stainless steel, or glass, with a small percentage in highly durable engineered plastic.

The prices for products are about the same, Szaky said, though buyers have to pay a deposit on the container that gets refunded after the empty packaging is returned. (Right now, a pint of Haagen-Dazs is listed at \$6.49 with a \$5 deposit; Febreze air mist is \$5 with a \$2 deposit; Hidden Valley ranch dressing is \$3.89 with a \$1 deposit; a 35-ounce canister of spaghetti is \$5 with a \$3 deposit.)

The question that Szaky said he and his partners addressed was: "How do we maintain the benefits of disposability, which are convenience and affordability, while solving the crisis of waste?"

When people buy coffee, they don't want to own the disposable cup it comes in; when they buy a candy bar, they aren't buying it because they want to own the wrapper, he said. He thought he could shift ownership of the packaging onto manufacturers—giving them an incentive to make the packaging long-lasting, durable, and thus reusable.

"Finally consumers are starting to make this connection that ... if we can force companies to rethink their distribution strategies—which is really all (Loop) is—then maybe we can move the needle on sustainability efforts," Dobscha said.

The Loop process cuts the carbon footprint of a transaction by 75 percent, according to TerraCycle's studies. Other research by the University of Washington has shown that grocery delivery is better for the environment than individual shopping.

Four weeks since the stateside launch, 60,000 users have signed up online, according to Loop, with 15,000 in the Mid-Atlantic region. Loop would not disclose sales information, but said several products sold out in the opening weeks.

Szaky hopes to launch the service in London in September and the West Coast and Midwest next year. He also plans to open in Germany, Japan, Australia, and Canada next year, with a goal of "millions" signed up soon.

"We're just having, you can imagine, a pretty awesome time," he said.

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