

Removing mini-shampoos from hotel rooms won't save the environment

August 23, 2019 8.28am EDT

InterContinental Hotels Group will replace mini-shampoos and conditioners with possibly more efficient bulk products by the year 2021.

But environmental activists shouldn't rejoice just yet.

The announcement is yet another example – such as banning plastic straws, false sustainability claims and corporate commitments that are far in the future – that seem to be more of a PR exercise than real attempts to move the needle.

I'm a professor of engineering and the director of the MIT Center of Transportation and Logistics. As I argue in my book "Balancing Green: When to Embrace Sustainability in a Business (And When Not To)," announcements of these kinds distract us from legitimate – and more challenging – measures we need to put in place to avoid environmental catastrophe.

Behind the headlines

InterContinental Hotels Group CEO Keith Barr says that replacing miniature bathroom products "will allow us to significantly reduce our waste footprint and environmental impact" at the conglomerate's hotel chains, which include InterContinental, Crowne Plaza and Holiday Inn.

It's true that the British foundation Clear Conscience estimates that 200 million travel-size toiletries end up in U.K. landfills every year, but there's another motivation: With 5,600 hotels, the savings for IHG can mount to over US\$11 million annually.

Additionally, studies we have carried out at MIT and elsewhere show that evaluations of a product's environmental impact can mislead if economists don't consider the entire supply chain management process.

For example, most of the carbon footprint of companies like Apple, Microsoft and Cisco comes from the suppliers who actually make the iPhones, routers and Xboxes, not directly from the company itself.

Additionally, the net reduction in discarded plastic could be minimal at best if the larger containers are filled from single-use plastic pouches. Also, we do not yet know if the larger containers are recyclable, nor the cost and environmental impacts of making, transporting, installing and maintaining them.

Even if replacing miniature toiletries does reduce waste somewhat – as other hotel chains join the movement and ban them – the move to bulk products will barely put a

dent in the plastic waste that now clogs the planet's rivers and oceans. It is another "feel good" initiative which help avoid the move to more serious actions that can actually make a difference.

Banning plastic straws is another such example. While outlawing plastic straws makes for excellent public relations copy, it has virtually no impact on the global accumulation of plastic garbage.



McDonald's and other organizations plan to replace plastic straws with paper ones. [Reuters/Toby Melville](#)

Skin-deep support

At least the hotel chain is responding to consumers' professed increasing support for green products and services, right?

Some studies find that more than 80% of consumers say they will make personal sacrifices to address social and environmental issues. However, when actually buying goods, consumer support for environmental products largely evaporates.

To try to explain the gap between what people say and how much they're willing to pay, my students and I observed consumers' choices in supermarkets in Boston.

These supermarkets presented sustainable choices in large green frames around the sustainable products – detergents, soaps, paper products and others – alongside

“regular” products in the same aisle. Fewer than 10% of consumers chose the sustainable products, though the study found somewhat higher percentages among highly educated and higher income consumers. The sustainable products were, by and large, between 5% and 7% more expensive.

Given customer ambivalence toward paying for green products, companies engage in token measures that insulate them from reputational damage and the unwanted attention of environmental groups, which could lead to NGO and media complaints or consumer boycotts and lost sales.

Beyond that, brands will reclassify economically sensible cost-cutting initiatives, such as energy savings, as sustainability initiatives.

One good way to green hotels is to restrict hotels’ use of energy-thirsty air conditioning. Another is to charge guests for not reusing towels rather than imploring them to reuse these items.

Granted, a slogan that states “Our hotel will not keep rooms cooler than 75 degrees in the summer and no warmer than 65 degrees in the winter” may not increase hotels’ market share. Even the replacement of the small shampoo bottles with bulk dispensers is leading to consumers’ apprehension.



InterContinental Hotels Group is considering flushing their mini-toiletries down the drain and replacing them with bulk items. [KR Netez/Shutterstock.com](https://www.krnz.com/story/news/business/2019/05/15/intercontinental-hotels-flushing-mini-toiletries-down-drain-replacing-with-bulk-items/1147000002/)

Futile gestures

Perhaps the most damaging fallout from symbolic corporate green “feel good” initiatives is that they distract from actions that can make a difference.

More specifically, companies could focus their efforts on carbon-reducing technology. No existing technologies are available on a global scale, but a small example of such a successful international agreement is the “Montreal Protocol” to ban substances that deplete the ozone layer.

Governments could implement adaptation measures for the changing climate such as building sea walls on vulnerable coastlines, planning for changes in food production patterns and the massive migration that may follow. An example of a comprehensive adaption strategy is the work of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency.

In a world where companies engage in tokenism to satisfy their customers feign green preferences, InterContinental Hotels Group efforts are perfectly acceptable. But that world is likely to be short-lived.