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Sustainability Is Here to Stay

by

Eve Turow Paul

Author and Consultant

“Sustainability” is not just the latest buzzword — it’s a new cultural value. While debates about climate change fill political airwaves, there’s a young generation of folks eagerly buying organic goods, installing solar panels and limiting their use of plastic bags and water bottles. I’m talking about Millennials and Generation Z.

For those born after 1980, news has shifted from the [effects of hairspray on the ozone layer](#) to maps tracking the [eventual flooding of coastal cities](#). At the same time, “green” options at the corner store have become more common, along with organic and biodynamic foods in the grocery aisles. People talk about offsetting their carbon footprints and tracking water usage. Sustainability has become a way of life, a value system to live by.

A 2014 survey by the Glass Packaging Institute found that “*Millennials feel they have more at stake than any other generation when it comes to matters of health and the environment.*”¹ As a generation, the survey found, those ages 21 to 35 were “more likely than any other age group to be concerned about serious environmental issues, but also feel that they can make a difference through lifestyle changes that can add up to benefit the environment.”

Dominating Millennial worries are the issues of climate change, protecting natural resources, and growing landfills. “*Over 80 percent of Millennials say that being eco-friendly improves their quality of life, and three-fourths actively look for changes they can make in their home and lifestyle to be greener,*” the report states.

Some of these changes can include composting, turning the lights off when leaving a room, ridesharing or using public transportation, and buying foods that come from farms that utilize sustainable practices, like no-till, crop rotations or permaculture.

¹ [The Millennials](#): a generation invested in health and the environment. Glass Packaging Institute & EcoFocus Worldwide Research November 2014
The U.S. Sustainability Alliance at www.thesustainabilityalliance.us

Studies² show environmental concern influences organic food consumer preferences. Consumers associate organic food “*with natural process, care for the environment and animal welfare and the non-use of pesticides and fertilizers*”, notes a study³ from academics at the Environmental Health Department of Universiti Teknologi MARA in Malaysia and the School of Environment and Life Sciences at University of Salford in the United Kingdom.

As such, in the food space, the interest in sustainability is self-evident. Total U.S. acreage for biodynamic farming increased by 16% in 2016. Organic foods are now in 82.3% of American households⁴ and demand continues to soar in the UK⁵. Big brands are boasting carbon sequestration and water conservation⁶ initiatives to woo weary customers. Farmers are the new heroes, as people aim to know who’s growing their food.

Those who grow our food are the true change-agents. Farmers make innumerable choices a day that can have beneficial or grave effects on the health of soil, water, air and physical wellbeing. As such, consumers are increasingly putting their dollars where their values are —toward brands and products they trust, and that support farmers who use methods comfort the shopper.

Young people are leading this charge, spending more than other generations on organic and specialty foods. According to Nielsen,⁷ 58% of all people say they would pay a premium for an environmentally-friendly brand, but this number jumps significantly, up 72%, for those ages 15 to 20. In fact, a group of young people, ages nine to 20, have filed a [lawsuit](#) against the U.S. government and its fossil fuel policies.

Kids today are exposed to the role of agriculture on environmental stability through school gardens, news of innovative hydroponic and aquaponic farming methods, and the vegan philosophies that fill magazines and food TV shows about the carbon footprint of livestock. Tweens and teens watch videos about climate change on Snapchat. The topic is no longer fringe, but foundational.

The Millennial mentality around sustainability is complex. For many, sustainable options make economic sense: Spend less on gas by buying a hybrid car, spend less on energy by installing solar panels, create our own soil by composting, save money by swapping in more legumes for pricey meat.

² [Consumers’ attitude toward organic food](#). Procedia Economics and Finance vol. 31 2015 pages 444-452

³ [Consumer perceptions towards organic food](#). Procedia Social and Behavioral Science vol. 49 2012 pages 360-367

⁴ [Organic is on the menu in most US homes](#). Organic Trade Association April 3, 2017

⁵ [Organic food sales soar as shoppers put quality before price](#). *The Guardian* February 19, 2017

⁶ [Healthy soils could deliver \\$50 billion in benefits annually](#). General Mills November 1, 2016 & [Nestlé to transform milk factory to ‘zero water’ in California](#). May 13, 2015

⁷ [Green Generation](#): Millennials say sustainability is a shopping priority. Nielsen Global Survey May 11, 2015
The U.S. Sustainability Alliance at www.thesustainabilityalliance.us

For others, the motivation is set in fear: fear of pesticides, antibiotics, genetically modified foods, heart disease or leaving behind lands so depleted we won't be able to feed future generations. Because of this, as reported by food and beverage marketing firm, Hartman Group,⁸ many associate the term “*sustainability*” with “*responsibility*.”

Yet, a survey by the Global Shapers Community found that only 14% of Latin American and Chinese Millennials feel they can trust multinational corporations “to be honest and fair.” A study by market research group, Mintel,⁹ found that American Millennials are nearly twice as likely to distrust food manufacturers as older adults and according to JWT Intelligence, 81% of U.S. Millennials believe that big food companies “*pursue policies that make Americans less healthy*.” In short, Millennials around the world don't trust big companies or institutions to be responsible, to do the right thing.

In response, shoppers are asking for simple ingredients, transparent labeling, and origin stories so that they can discern for themselves whether the food provider is, in fact, creating their product responsibly. *Successful Farming* magazine estimates that 98% of people in the United States don't know a farmer. One survey of British youth shows a shocking detachment from the farm; the report claims that “*fewer than half of those surveyed know butter comes from a dairy cow and a third do not know eggs come from hens*.”¹⁰ With news stories about rising rates of obesity, claims of ‘pink slime’ in our food, and algae blooms from synthetic nitrogen runoff, can you blame farm-less folks for being weary?

This is not to say young people are forgoing their usual luxuries for sustainability's sake. For many, the main inhibitor to always purchasing the most sustainable products comes down to convenience and price—the sustainable option must be economical and available. Yet, put all three things together—sustainable, affordable and accessible—and any product is sure to fly off shelves.

When it comes to pushing forward on sustainability, Millennial parents are becoming the trendsetters. From buying energy efficient homes to reusable diapers, 30-somethings are focused on feeding their children foods that feel safe, and are doing what they can to support a sustainable planet for their children. In terms of buying organic, organic no one spends more than Millennial parents.¹¹ According to a study by FutureCast, “*Millennial parents' top concerns are environmental issues and what their kids eat*.”¹²

⁸ [Consumer distinctions between organic and natural](#). Hartman Group report 2016

⁹ [Millennials twice as likely to distrust 'big food', study says](#). Mintel October 29, 2015

¹⁰ [Where do milk, eggs and bacon come from?](#) One in three youths don't know. The Telegraph June 14, 2012

¹¹ [Millennials and organic: a winning combination](#). Organic Trade Association September 22, 2016

¹² [Getting to know Gen Z](#). FutureCast January 2017.

This population, it seems, is also most willing to overlook the boundaries of cost and convenience in order to provide their children with what they believe to be safe and nutritious options.

At the end of the day, a young person's interest in sustainability all comes back around to trying to do what's right: Leave a planet behind that is habitable for our children, with clean air, soil and water; Eat foods that nourish us and our children, not foods that make us a part of the rising rates of obesity and diabetes; Use what we need and properly distribute of what we don't to create comfortable, hunger-free lives for as many people as possible.

For farmers, this poses a challenge and an opportunity. People want to feel as though they're making the right decisions—farmers can help them with their choice. This makes it imperative for farmers to tell their stories appropriately. It's also important to get people back on the land, for a personal experience. Marketing can be pushed aside. Seeing and learning first-hand about life on a farm is an experience that is undeniable. By exposing people to personal stories, the opportunity to see the soil, taste the harvest and witness the process, consumers can become even stronger advocates for the farmers they know and the methods they understand.

It's also through these personal experiences and greater education that common public misconceptions can be put to rest. Organic farming is not inherently sustainable and big, commodity crop farms are not inherently unsustainable. The nuances of farming can only come to light with a greater understanding of the complexities of agriculture.

Most important, many believe that those in agriculture have been irresponsible — irresponsible with caring for land, wellbeing of animals, growing the most nutritious crops possible. For those who want to prove that mentality wrong, now is the time — time to cross the foodie/farmer lines to exchange our hopes, our fears and our passions. For many, sustainability is a focus on both sides.

As a Millennial, I feel quite comfortable saying that the topic of sustainability is not a fad that will fade with time, but a belief and weight that we carry with us. It's a value system being passed down to our children. And it is a movement that those in the agriculture community can and should lead, to help us sow a sustainable future, today.

For comments or further information please contact Eve Turow Paul at eve@eveturowpaul.com or David Green at david@thesustainabilityalliance.us

About the author



Eve Turow Paul is an author and consultant who studies the wants and needs of Millennial and Gen Z generations to gain an understanding of their anxieties, hopes and passions and where they spend their incomes. Eve is the author of *A Taste of Generation Yum*. She advises Fortune 500 companies, start-ups and independent entrepreneurs on how to connect with and better serve Millennials. Eve formerly worked for *New York Times* and cookbook author Mark Bittman. She is a *Forbes* contributor and her writing has appeared in a number of publications including *Chicago Tribune*, *Plate*, *The Village Voice*, *The Atlantic*, *Refinery29* and *Huffington Post* among others.

Note from the editor

The above work was commissioned by the [U.S. Sustainability Alliance](http://www.thesustainabilityalliance.us) and represents the views of the author only. The U.S. Sustainability Alliance (USSA), comprising American farmers, fishermen and foresters, was formed in recognition that sustainability is not an arbitrary threshold, but rather a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation. A goal of the Alliance is to share U.S. stewardship and sustainability practices with colleagues and counterparts across the world for greater mutual understanding of resource management practices.