

# Conscious consumerism in the retail space

 By [Justin Smith](#)

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Conscious consumerism and innovation are on the rise in the retail space and customers are demanding that increased attention is paid to sustainability, ethical sourcing, making a difference and conserving scarce environmental resources when making their purchasing decisions.



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In this regard, the retail industry can benefit from aligning their in-store offerings - and by extension, their buying and supply chain development - with their customers' needs. Essentially, this means retailers have to be increasingly sensitive to changing customer demands and support customers' ethical approach to contributing to both people and the planet.

## Shopping with a difference

More and more consumers are asking questions about the products they buy. Consumers want to know about the information behind the product they buy: is it environmentally-friendly, is it locally sourced, and does it contribute towards a better future?

With this in mind, the retail industry should focus on increasing their commitment to responsible sourcing. But it requires going one step further, retailers are in the position to help customers to make informed decisions. The very nature of shopping is curated convenience - and the harder retailers work to match both a convenient shopping experience with the knowledge and information needed for customers to make their ethical choices, the better supported they will be in the future.

Shopping and sustainability are linked in another way that makes a difference, and that is in the supply chain. Big South African retailers are in a unique position to grow and develop their suppliers, but also to support suppliers on a journey to becoming more sustainable and in tune with the end consumer's wants and needs. This impacts the future sustainability of their businesses in a knock-on effect. If retailers focus on this, then both the customer and the supplier are informed and developed in the process, and the links between beginning and end more complete.

## Saving on scarce resources

The recent global climate change negotiations have highlighted the ongoing need for the retail industry in South Africa to

manage energy, water and other scarce resources in an efficient way. The current drought we are experiencing is also indicative of the need to conserve and to ensure we use our resources responsibly.

2015 was marked with challenges in our energy and water sector, and has put even more pressure on industry to make a concerted effort towards sustainability.

Retailers, as real estate owners and tenants, need to look at resource consumption patterns, both in store and along the supply chain, to see where savings can be made. Cutting back on the use of scarce resources, and measuring and monitoring resources properly has to become a critical part of doing business.

Joining the National Business Initiative (NBI), a voluntary coalition of South African and multinational companies committed to working towards sustainable growth and development in South Africa and the shaping of a sustainable future through responsible business leadership and action, is one route to co-managing the consumption of resources in our and other industries.

## **Education campaigns**

Staff education campaigns are another way to make a sustainable impact - and teaching employees how to save resources also makes an impact on their bottom lines while simultaneously supporting sustainability goals. According to Statistics SA, the retail industry employs roughly 23% of South Africa's labour force, which means the sector has the ability to make a profound difference.

Water, refrigeration, heating, fuel, power and lighting, packaging, food waste - all of these factors, and more, need to be

considered in a retailers journey to more sustainable business practices.

Most importantly, the move toward sustainability in the retail space requires good leadership - and it is this that will define the industry in years to come.

## ABOUT JUSTIN SMITH

Justin Smith is head of the Woolworths Good Business Journey (Sustainability Programme). He is responsible for the strategy, structure and integration across the business to deliver its over 200 targets across transformation, social development, environmental issues and climate change.  
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