

Sustainability's not sustainable. It's time for rejuvenation.



By [Maxine Selmer-Olsen](#)

8 Dec 2021

The more articles I read about COP26, the guiltier I feel about my growing pile of black Woolies shopping bags.



Source: www.unsplash.com

Despite my best efforts (and warnings on the trolley) it's just not that easy to remember them when I pop in for a quick shop after gym or on the way home from work. And while it's better news for the planet that my absent-mindedness doesn't result in another plastic bag floating around, I still wind up with something I don't really need.

That's exactly why sustainability's not actually sustainable. The gap between our intention and our action is too big for it to be. Data from another WPP agency reveals that of the 85% of people who say that they avoid single-use plastic, only 20% do that *every time*. And research house Stylus has shared studies that reveal that while 65% of UK consumers say that they consider sustainability when they decide what to buy, only 9% put their money with their mouth is. We don't have figures for South Africa, but they're not likely to tell a different story.

Lots of brands speak about sustainability, using it as a reason to buy their product. This is very easy for them to do, since most sustainability initiatives pass the buck and rely on the people buying the product to reuse, recycle, or remember.



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7 Dec 2021



Despite our best intentions, we often forget all three. A big part of the attitude-action gap is convenience - or lack thereof. If it's not easy to do, very few of us will actually do it. But, the brand feels it's done its bit and can get a great campaign out of it.

That's why sustainability's been a favourite bandwagon for such a long time. Because it's so unclear what sustainability actually entails, it's an easy buzzword to toss around and an even easier curtain to hide behind.

But the fact is, most of us are lazy and happy to pass the buck, even though we'd be hard-pressed to admit it. We'll share articles about the climate crisis, but the next time we're thirsty on the road, we'll buy a cool drink in a plastic bottle without a second thought. Or, if we're Boris Johnson, catch a private plane home from a conference on climate change. It's easy enough to assuage our consciences by convincing ourselves that it's just this once — and surely we're too small to make a difference, anyway?

In a way, we're right in thinking that. Dr Shahzeen Attari, who studies why we make the decisions we do around the climate crisis, has shown that changing a few individuals' attitudes and behaviour is nowhere near sufficient to tackle the issue. Her research reveals that the easy options available to most of us — cramming as much washing into the machine so we only have to do one load, turning off the lights whenever we leave a room, remembering our shopping bags — have only a minimal effect in the long-term.



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In its efforts to do less, sustainability simply isn't doing enough for the environment. It's the big and uncomfortable changes that will make the difference, like not having plastic bottles on the shelves. This isn't consumer behaviour change; it's where brands, and the companies they represent, have to stand up and lead.

Recently, experts have been speaking about a new approach to replace sustainability - rejuvenation. The difference between rejuvenation and its predecessor is simple: If sustainability aims to minimise harm, rejuvenation aims to maximise benefit. It holds that brands should go beyond committing to putting back into the environment what they've taken out in the process of making their product, but put back more than what they've taken out, therefore not arriving at a net-zero situation, but actively take steps to restore and replenish what has been lost — leaving more than footprints behind.

It's no longer enough to be carbon-neutral; businesses should be carbon-negative. Naturally, this requires massive investment and restructuring. But it pays off. It's not a crime for a business to seek a profit, and to use its brands as a way of achieving that. Rejuvenation promises not just the chance to do good, but also to earn profit in the long-term for companies patient enough to wait that long (and with a real intention to make a tangible difference to the places and people around its operations).



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Significantly, it forces brands to not just preach purpose, but do the hard work to prove it — and make it easier for people to join in on their efforts. There's a lovely example of a New Zealand fashion brand, Sheep Inc., which sells carbon-negative

high-quality wool garments, and even throws a sheep into the mix. Don't worry about the extra shipping costs; they'll just send you the occasional update about the sheep that donated the wool for your new jersey.

Rejuvenation carries much more responsibility than sustainability does, but in this case, great responsibility comes with great power.

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