

lululemon – Implementing a Grassroots Store Polybag Recycling Program

RILA Retail Energy Management Program: October 2018



Assistant Store Manager Caroline Colt poses outside her lululemon store in Boulder, CO

Implementation Model:

lululemon Assistant Store Manager's Polybag Recycling Efforts Support Corporate Sustainability through Employee Engagement

BARRIER

Clothing retailers generate store waste from protective packaging materials like polybags, but not all shopping centers offer recycling programs that accept them.

SOLUTION

Design and implement a store-specific polybag recycling program, in coordination with property management.

OUTCOME

After a one-month pilot, a lululemon store in Boulder, Colorado successfully implemented a polybag recycling program, which to date includes seven other retailers in the same shopping center.

Overview

lululemon, the athletic apparel retailer, has more than 400 retail stores worldwide. Like other clothing retailers, lululemon uses polybags—thin, plastic pouches that hold clothing—to protect product as it is shipped from manufacturing facilities to distribution centers, retail stores, and consumers' homes. At a lululemon retail store in Boulder, Colorado, Assistant Store Manager Caroline Colt took the initiative to reduce store waste by addressing polybag disposal at her store.

Process

lululemon products are shipped in polybags from the retailer's finished goods vendors to its distribution centers. Polybags are currently the best way to protect many apparel products, by keeping them clean and safe during transportation, by providing protection from humidity during shipping, and by preventing dust and dirt from accumulating on products when stored at distribution centers. However, even though they are

"I am proud to have set up a cost effective and successful polybag recycling program at my lululemon store and hope that my program inspires other retailers to do the same. This recycling program is just a drop in the bucket towards solving a much larger problem, but hopefully this will show others that creating sustainable solutions is possible and that change can start with one person."

Caroline Colt
Assistant Store Manager, Boulder, CO
lululemon

recyclable, many municipalities cannot accept soft plastics like bags and flexible film with other recyclables because of the challenges they pose when processed through a municipal recycling facility (MRF). Because of this issue, lululemon has searched for viable alternatives for polybags, but have not found a scalable solution to date. As other clothing retailers have experienced, lululemon found that eliminating polybags altogether increases waste from damaged products and is not a viable solution.

As Assistant Store Manager at a Boulder, CO lululemon, Caroline Colt noticed an accumulation of polybags as she and other employees stocked products. Colt, who has a life-long passion for sustainability, decided to investigate a polybag waste recycling program for her store to address this issue.

One of the most important aspects of designing the polybag recycling program was establishing the right partnerships. First, Colt sought to identify a local recycling center for more challenging materials. The City of Boulder prioritizes sustainability and has established a zero waste by 2025 goal. [Boulder's Universal Zero Waste Ordinance](#) requires businesses to recycle and compost, provide zero waste signage, and educate employees on what items go where. Given this ecosystem of support, it wasn't long before Colt identified the company [Eco-Cycle](#) and its Center for Hard-to-Recycle Materials, or [CHaRM](#), who could help her.

Second, Colt worked to identify the contact at the store's property management company, Macerich, who had the authority to approve special polybag dumpsters that Eco-Cycle needed to place onsite. Colt stayed persistent to identify the proper Macerich contacts and channels of authority. Once Colt found the correct contacts thanks to her broad outreach, she worked to secured Macerich's approval in several ways. First, she shared that she had already identified a recycling company that accepted the material. Second, she emphasized the importance of recycling and zero waste

to the City of Boulder and lululemon. Third, she pointed out that diverting a large volume of plastic from scheduled waste pickups could ultimately reduce the number of dumpsters needed on the property and/or frequency of pickups. As a result, Macerich approved the program and the storage of two large locked collection bins for polybags in a common area.

In parallel, Colt reached out to the lululemon corporate office to propose the project and request financing for a pilot. lululemon, which has a strong corporate commitment to sustainability, was willing to fund recycling programs that their stores were lacking. lululemon approved the pilot program for a one-month trial period at the Boulder store.

Once the pilot officially began in July of 2017, Colt aligned all associates on the process for recycling the polybags. For the first week, she monitored their activities to ensure that the protocols for recycling were followed. Once the store team understood the purpose of the program, they were enthusiastic about implementing it and Colt continued to train new additions.

By the Numbers:

Month in 2018	Total Plastic Diverted by Polybag Program (lbs)*
January	912
February	528
March	384
April	112
May	525
June	768
July	288
August	720

**Includes all eight stores in program*

Outcomes

After the one-month pilot was completed, Colt received such positive feedback from the shopping center that they offered to take on the full cost of implementing the program into the future.

In October 2017, Colt began recruiting other retailers within the shopping center to join the recycling program. As of September 2018, the program has been running for about one year and has seven other retailers participating, which comprise about half of the businesses at the property.

Colt is also working to set up additional bins and recruit participation from stores located in the same shopping center but across the street. Colt has made herself a resource to store managers and associates at other lululemon stores who are interested in pursuing a similar project. She used lululemon's internal sustainability web portal to not only find the correct people to get approval for the initial project, but to communicate the successes of the program on an ongoing basis and connect with other stores to

help them implement similar programs. With help from lululemon corporate, Colt is identifying other high-volume lululemon stores in Colorado that may be good candidates for such a program.

While lululemon plans to continue to explore ways of reducing polybags (e.g. right-sizing bags to eliminate waste, searching for practices that allow them to eliminate bags altogether), and improve the content and recyclability of the bags, the retailer is also exploring ways in which additional store recycling programs can address the polybags currently in use.

Ultimately, the success of the Boulder, CO lululemon recycling program is due to the passion, commitment, and initiative of an employee who was able to navigate the needs of her store, a landlord that listened closely to the needs of its tenants, and a retailer that empowers employees across job functions to improve the sustainability of the company.

Internal Process Spotlight: Implementing a Store Recycling Program

Managing a sustainability program that impacts hundreds or even thousands of store locations is no small task. Enterprising store associates who want to improve the sustainability performance of their stores can take the initiative to help the corporate office meet sustainability goals and serve as a resource for other store locations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Identify the landlord company that owns and operates the property. Many large property developers have their own sustainability initiatives and goals that you can read about on their website. Explain how your project supports their goals to create an additional incentive for them to help;
- ✓ If the local property manager is not familiar with their own company's sustainability efforts, work with your corporate sustainability team to identify that company's sustainability lead. Associations like RILA and the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) can help;
- ✓ Reach out to the property manager to identify the correct contacts to work with to initiate a recycling program, such as the contact in charge of waste, to find out if existing services could be expanded;
- ✓ Conduct research on local recycling companies to potentially hire;
- ✓ Identify other retailers in the shopping center who are interested in also participating in a recycling program and approach the landlord with multiple interested companies; and
- ✓ Demonstrate success of any pilot programs.

RILA Sustainability Program

Program Background

Retailers have a significant opportunity to reduce the impacts of their vast portfolio of locations and extensive supply chains, to the benefit of both companies and the environment. The Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA) is committed to helping its members overcome barriers to improving sustainability across their operations through its Retail Sustainability Committee.

Join the Program

Retail sustainability managers interested in participating should email Erin Hiatt, Director of Energy, Sustainability & Research, at Erin.Hiatt@RILA.org.

Learn more at rila.org/sustainability