Are corporates looking to ship some environmental responsibility to consumers?

Unilever's revised climate goals are the most ambitious of any consumer goods firms in relation to emissions reduction and include plans to put labels on each of its 70,000 products detailing how much greenhouse gas was emitted during their manufacture and shipping.

The company aims to make its operations and those of its suppliers net zero by 2039, while investing $1.1B in climate initiatives over the next decade. In 2010, Unilever pledged to cut emissions from its products by 50% by 2030. The company's emissions have been falling since 2016.

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On the surface of it, Unilever's move seems to be a noble one, particularly considering it's part of a $1.1B effort to address climate risks and environmental issues. The firm also recently announced it would use

blockchain to help eradicate deforestation from its supply chain.

Labelling products detailing their carbon footprint could, however, be seen as an attempt to pass some of the responsibility for overall emissions and environmental impact onto consumers.

Such an approach wouldn't be out-of-step among mass consumer companies. Earlier this year, for example, Coca-Cola backed persevering with single-use plastic, citing consumer demand. Rival PepsiCo made similar remarks, stating the use of such packaging was not in itself bad, but that consumers needed to understand how to dispose of, or re-use it, appropriately.

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There have been examples of corporates being held accountable for their environmental impact by policymakers, even if it can be argued the fault ultimately lies with the customer.

In India, for example, regulators have mandated that consumer goods companies take responsibility for ensuring certain types of packaging are disposed of appropriately.

Some corporates have turned to technology to tackle the issue. In China, for example, Alipay is making use of QR codes and waste-management apps to help residents sort rubbish and deal with overbearing recycling regulations.

Unilever's labelling efforts, of course, don't just concern its packaging, but the overall environmental impact of its products. Its approach may alter consumers' behaviour, lessening demand for problematic products. It may also, however, allow the firm to show its customers are consciously consuming items despite knowing their harm, potentially allowing some of the blame to be shared.

With "carbon labelling" in its infancy, however, some commentators have noted there is not enough evidence to determine whether consumers' habits will be altered by this approach.

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