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Plastic Bags are not just for Christmas. . . .

Londoners are obsessed with bags – but believe it or not, plastic bags, and not just designer handbags. It all started when designer Anya Hindmarch launched the now legendary must-have “I am not a plastic bag” canvas shopper. Unlike her normal creations that cost upwards of 500€, this simple over-the-shoulder shopper cost 8€. It sold out in minutes and caused much discussion as to the “real” cost of plastic bags to the environment (It is estimated that each year, every British person uses nearly 170 plastic bags per year, most of which are not reused and end up in landfill).

As Christmas shopping begins, and warnings of the “danger” of plastic bags multiply, there is a scramble for the most trendy non-plastic shopping bag. While most Londoners cannot afford (or even to be honest, get on the waiting list) for an Eco-tist designer version by Stella McCartney or Louis Vuitton, supermarkets and shops have been promoting their own small but effective initiatives. Tesco, Britain’s biggest supermarket group, offer valuable points on a Clubcard for every bag not used. They also encourage people to bring their own re-useable bags by reducing the size and quality of the free bags at the checkout (rendering them practically useless). Rival chain Sainsbury’s meanwhile has bag recycling bins, and promotes “permanent bags”. Other chains have reasonably priced so-called “bags for life” which vary widely in style and chic-ness.

Outside London one town has gone one stage further and banned the plastic bag completely. Modbury in Devon is a modest town with around 40 small shops and traders, but has now become famous for becoming the first “Plastic-Bag” free town in Europe. Instead of plastic, shops offer paper, cloth and cotton bags, olives and meat are wrapped in corn-starch paper. The town has even commissioned its own environmentally friendly “Modbury shopping bag”, likely to become the new collector’s item. The costs of the campaign are still being calculated, but meanwhile the town is benefiting enormously from a boost to its image of a sleepy English town, to a cutting-edge campaign headquarters.

While many people and papers in England are sceptical as to the use and real effectiveness of such schemes and campaigns to rid the planet of plastic bags, these small but symbolic acts of environmentalism not only gives Londoners in particular the chance to feel that they are doing something, but also gives shops the chance to hugely improve their image at a relatively small price. It is also for smaller retailers part of a key communication and loyalty channel to customers – such as at Gail’s bread shop in Notting Hill, they offer 10% discount when you bring your Gail’s 8€ re-useable bread bag with you.

The real challenge for such schemes and for shops is how to speak to the next generation of Londoners. Generation Y, also known as the “us us us” generation believe, according to a new survey by the Henley Centre, that “looking after ourselves” will best improve the quality of life. While they also show extreme self-absorption, and believe in putting the individual first, they also show a paradoxical interest in socially responsible causes. And even occasionally, a plastic bag!