Stakeholder Interviews

University of Richmond Dining Services

Eliot Cleveland, Manager of EveryThingConvenience (ETC)

ETC is currently the most profitable retail location on campus, and one of only two (along with Dean’s Den) that offers solely pre-packaged items, rather than made-to-order selections. Eliot Cleveland has managed ETC for the past two years and has overseen the convenience store make strides towards more sustainable options where they can. “It can be hard to see the changes at the convenience store, because everything comes in a package,” Cleveland admits. “Two years ago,” he says, “we started stocking a variety of reusable options such as cups, utensils, straws, and reusable grocery bags--and they’ve been a hit. We also provide discounts to customers who bring their own sustainable items such as a reusable bag, straw, or mug.”

Despite these efforts, the bulk of what ETC sells is pre-packaged items, with the largest category being beverages. Due to the Coca-Cola contract’s mandate for a certain amount of sales space to be dedicated towards Coke products, and ETC’s situation as a “grab-and-go” spot on campus, ETC has the highest density of Coke products of all retail locations, and a large number of SPBs. Cleveland sees the grocery industry heading towards the elimination of plastic, though he doesn’t think it will happen overnight. “We’re the retailers, but we’re just one part of the value chain,” he explains.

In order to radically shift the value chain of SPB, he believes, consumers will need to indicate that they won’t purchase environmentally-harmful products. “We think about what the customer wants—the most important thing for us is to meet their needs. So they have to send a powerful signal to us that they don’t want [single use plastic bottles]. Because right now, they buy them.” Three of the top five items at ETC are single-use plastic water bottles—with SmartWater Sport coming in at #1, SmartWater 1L at #2, and the 20 oz. Dasani bottle as #5. Straddling the line between the bottled water varieties are the Guayaki Yerba Mate Enlightenmint at #3 and Revel Berry at #4. In
fiscal year 2019, which spanned from July 1, 2018-June 30, 2019, ETC purchased 133,839 single-use plastic bottles.

Cleveland pointed out a few of the brands, like Guayaki, that package their beverages in aluminum cans rather than plastic. While he isn’t sure if Guayaki’s environmentally-conscious packaging impacts a consumer’s decision to buy, he does think that aluminum cans are perhaps more feasible for a product like an energy drink than for disposable water. “People like having a reclosable drink, with the portability of a bottle,” Cleveland observes. “Something like an energy drink that’s drunk pretty quickly and when it’s cold,” he offers, might not be subject to the same criteria by consumers.

In terms of other alternatives to plastic, Cleveland says that he’s seen Coke begin to carry more glass bottles, perhaps as a compromise between a reclosable lid and improved recyclability. The Boxed Water Is Better brand of boxed water is also sold in ETC, but it hasn’t enjoyed nearly as high of sales as its plastic disposable water counterpart. Despite being priced only around $0.10 higher in the 1 liter size, Cleveland says, consumers seem to prefer bottled water—or at least that’s what the sales data shows.

Cleveland understands that reduction and reuse of SPB are more viable alternatives in the current global climate than simply recycling SPB after consumption. However, in considering removing or dramatically reducing the availability of single-use plastic water bottles, Cleveland advocates for considering the consequences for students. He wonders if eliminating disposable plastic water bottles, an item that is clearly high in demand, would improve students’ health and ability to hydrate throughout the day. “We’re not really in this for the money, we’re in it for the students,” he expresses. “You can take [plastic water bottles] away, fine, but are we helping them, is the question.”

Regardless, Cleveland says, he’s optimistic that students can drive change towards more sustainable alternatives. “Our clientele is younger and more concerned than ever. On a percentage basis, if you were to compare us to other convenience stores, we probably do better, just on the nature of who we’re serving.”