



IN THE BAG:
a guide for
DRY CLEANERS
to move
BEYOND PLASTIC

August 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The impacts of climate change and images of plastic pollution are altering consumer expectations. Americans are increasingly looking for sustainability in products, practices, and services. Dry cleaners flourish in direct proportion to the satisfaction of their customers, who are community members and neighbors. The dry cleaning industry, which relies heavily on plastic film to bundle and protect finished garments, is conspicuous in its reliance on single-use plastic and is a good candidate for change. Government statistics indicate that dry cleaners utilize more than 300 million pounds of low density polyethylene (LDPE) film each year, known as polybags. None of this film plastic is reusable in any way, and only 4% of all film plastic is recycled. The vast majority becomes instant trash.

This is increasingly unacceptable to consumers, many of whom are looking for environmental accountability across numerous sectors of the economy. In the fall of 2021, 85 percent of people polled indicated that they had shifted their purchasing behavior towards being more sustainable in the past five years.¹ By reducing or eliminating the use of disposable plastic, dry cleaners can better align themselves with the lifestyle goals of consumers. Perhaps most importantly, they can take specific action to help combat the plastic pollution which now infiltrates every corner of the globe.

The reduction of single-use plastics in the dry cleaning industry is not only an effective way to save money, please customers, and reduce waste, it is also easily accomplished. Since most of the industry's single-use plastic is concentrated in the use of polybags, a few modifications in bagging practices will enormously reduce dry cleaners' contribution to our global plastic pollution crisis. This guide will detail how.



The Problem with Plastic – At a Glance

- ~ **Between 20 and 33 billion pounds of plastic pollution enter the ocean every year**, threatening the health and sustainability of marine ecosystems and wildlife. Plastic composes approximately 80% of all marine debris found from surface waters to deep-sea sediments.² The polybags utilized by dry cleaners are a part of this problem.
- ~ **Hundreds of marine species are vulnerable to ingestion, suffocation, and entanglement by plastic debris in the ocean.** Marine wildlife such as seabirds, whales, fish, and turtles mistake plastic waste for prey; most then die of starvation as their stomachs become filled with plastic.³
- ~ **Plastic is heavily associated with litter and trash on land, as well.** Single-use packaging accounts for 40% of the estimated 380 million tons of plastic manufactured each year, almost all of which is either landfilled, incinerated, or littered in the environment, with some of that entering rivers and then the ocean.
- ~ Plastics are made from petrochemicals, and **emissions from plastic production and disposal are fueling climate change and damaging air quality** in communities where plastics are made or incinerated. **This is a major environmental justice issue.**
- ~ **90% of emissions from plastic production** are released in just **18 communities in the US**, which are two-thirds **more likely to be communities of color.**⁴
- ~ **Plastic production, use, and disposal in the US contributed 464 billion pounds of greenhouse gas emissions** in 2020—equivalent to 116 average coal-fired power plants.⁵
- ~ **Plastic film is not reusable.**
- ~ **Plastics contain hundreds of added chemicals, many of which are toxic and dangerous for human health.** The plasticizers, flame retardants, heat stabilizers, coatings, dyes, and other additives that give plastics their properties include more than 2,400 “substances of concern.” These are associated with cancers, birth defects, and chronic conditions including diabetes, obesity, autoimmune disorders, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and declining fertility.⁶
- ~ **Plastics do not biodegrade.** Instead, they fragment into tiny particles called microplastics that **diffuse into all corners of the food chain.** Microplastics are present in many foodstuffs, including water, beer, seafood, and even honey. Smaller particles, known as nanoplastics, are present in soil and have been observed to lower crop yields and damage microorganisms in the soil—a problem for food production. Nanoplastics can cross the human placenta into the developing fetus and have been detected in human blood.⁷

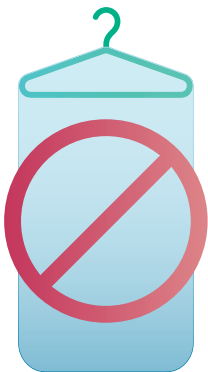
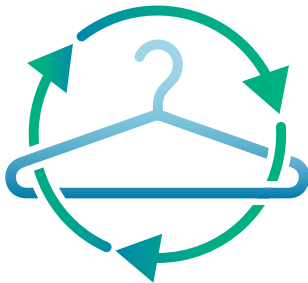
Solutions: Reuse or Eliminate

The crisply pressed garment hanging in a smooth plastic bag is synonymous with a job well done in the dry cleaning industry, but this was not always the case, nor does it need to be going forward. In fact, considering how difficult it can be to set one's dry cleaning business apart from others, the opportunity to present finished goods in a fresh, "sustainable" wrapping is an occasion to gain a competitive advantage. For businesses that are ready to move away from single-use polybags, there are several alternatives available that are attractive, popular, and affordable.



Reuse

The option with the greatest consumer appeal is reuse. Some cleaners are already swapping out polybags for textile bags, which cost between \$5 and \$19. The use of these bags also harnesses the growing market trend toward reusable bags, sending a market-savvy signal to consumers. Environmental concerns and changes in state or local law have already prompted many consumers to adopt the habit of bringing and returning bags for grocery shopping and other chores. Businesses that introduce reusable options often find that customers are familiar with the concept and are ready to make the switch. This is particularly likely at dry cleaners, where clients have become accustomed to saving and returning used hangers. Many cleaners that have made the switch have found that extending reuse practices from hangers to the bags that protect clean clothing is a natural next step, and that customers are often enthusiastic about the change.



Eliminate

In many instances, the best solution to excessive packaging is no packaging. Dry cleaning did not always come wrapped in plastic—or anything at all—and some cleaners are finding success by offering customers the option of skipping the bag altogether. Others charge a 10 or 20 cent fee for the bag, as a supermarket might.

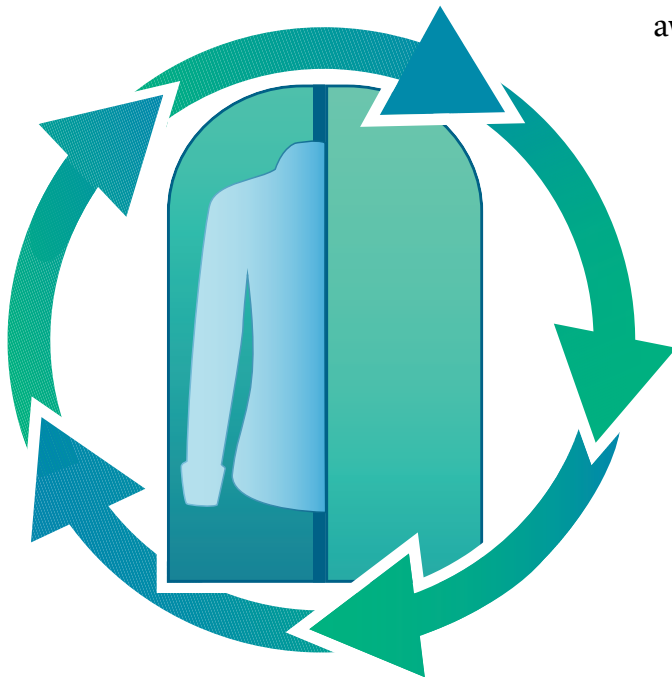
REUSE

Reusable Garment Bags

Reusable bags are the environmental gold standard.

They are also a matter of consumer preference, which is why the market for them is swelling at an incredible pace. In 2018, the global reusable bag market share was \$390 million in US dollars, and is expected to reach a whopping \$480 million by the end of 2025.⁸

Much of this growth is predicated on growing consumer awareness about the amount of plastic waste that is generated and that eventually makes its way to rivers, and ultimately to the ocean. Like many end-users of disposable plastics, businesses increasingly understand single-use bags to be a public relations liability.⁹ For many, the need to alter their practices has provided an opportunity to create branded reusable bags, which communicate a planet-friendly mind-set—or at least demonstrate that the companies are aware of the overuse of plastic in packaging.¹⁰



Dry cleaners are in an excellent position to benefit from this opportunity.

Several manufacturers now produce reusable garment bags tailored for dry cleaners in a range of materials and price points. These have been well received thus far, and are gaining popularity.

Cotton is Best

The most durable and sustainable of all of the existing options is the 100% cotton reusable garment bag. Cotton is a natural fiber that does not shed plastic strands (microfibers), is sturdy and washable, and if well treated, can last for decades. Cotton bags protect clothes from dust, insects, and abrasion, and are superior to polybags because they allow air to transfer and prevent moisture build-up. They also protect garments from the yellowing that can occur from prolonged contact with plastic.¹¹



The advantages of cotton are unmistakable, however suppliers can be difficult to locate. Because the cost of materials is high and the weight of the finished product is out of step with industry expectations, demand for cotton bags has traditionally been low. This will almost certainly change as sustainability becomes a more distinguishing feature of the industry. When compared with the cost of purchasing plastic film, cotton bags more than pay for themselves over a period of a few years. As customers adjust to their use, the demand for cotton bags will increase, just as it has in other parts of the reusable bag market.

One popular producer of cotton bags is [Spector Textiles](#). They manufacture a canvas-weight cotton bag that is 100% organic cotton. The bag is the same length and width as a mid-sized garment bag (25" x 48") and can be printed with a custom logo to retail for about \$19. Another option is [Idea Stage](#) which sells a cotton canvas garment bag with the option to customize with a logo that retail for \$12 - \$8, depending on the quantity purchased.

Dry cleaners that have made the switch suggest that a company can either distribute reusable bags for free with an order, or charge a small deposit that is refunded upon return of the bag. The goodwill that results is likely to generate repeat customers, which some say far outweighs the cost. The presence of the company's logo on the bags is of further benefit, as it advertises the businesses' commitment to eliminating plastics. This is likely to be noticed by people who are not yet clients, and for whom a more sustainable dry cleaner is an attractive option.



Synthetics (For Now)

In a transitional industry, it may make better business sense to use a transitional product. This is why so many cleaners are now embracing synthetic reusable bags, which are inexpensive, colorful, and replicate the lightweight, feathery feel of polybags in a manner that appeals to customers and employees alike. These bags are not a superior solution from an environmental perspective, as they are made of petrochemicals and shed microfibers, but they are dramatic reducers of waste, they promote the habit of reuse, and they are as easy to source as they are to integrate into ordinary business practices. Synthetic reusable bags represent a practical waste reduction approach that is far preferable to single-use disposable polybags, with plenty of advantages for business.



The **Green Garmento** is one such bag. It is made of non-woven polypropylene and has a side zipper for access to hanging garments, and a see-through front pocket for the sales receipt or other customer ID. It can be inverted to serve as a hamper and draw-string bag for customers to transport dirty clothes to the cleaners. While a cotton, linen, or fiber-based bag would be environmentally preferable, the synthetic material utilized by the Green Garmento is durable, breathable, and lightweight, which makes it easier to store, and lowers the price point to increase accessibility, particularly for businesses first experimenting with the model. Each bag costs consumers between \$5 and \$10 and accommodates between 10 and 12 garments—4 more than the average order. Businesses can advertise their commitment to reducing their plastic use and enhance their exposure by having the bags branded with their own names and logos.



Spector Textiles also manufactures a ReuserBag—a polyester and nylon bag which, like the other models, starts out as a drawstring laundry bag and can be inverted into a hanging garment bag. This is available for \$11.



Cleaners' Supply manufactures a similar product under the trademark Eco2Go. Sometimes referred to as a converta bag, it, too, is manufactured out of polypropylene material, includes an invoice pocket, and can hold numerous garments at once. Eco2Go comes in three colors, and can be customized with a brand. It is similarly priced.

Generic versions of the reusable synthetic bag are available from a range of suppliers. Manufacturers move in and out of existence, but comparable products can be readily found with a quick internet search.

ELIMINATE

Some customers would be happy with no bags at all.

To do away with single-use plastic altogether, one option is to simply have the clothes come off the conveyor “naked” and allow customers to bring their own bags to put on before they leave the store. Prior to the popularization of the plastic bag in the 1950s, this was standard procedure. Decades later, the success of the automatic polybagger made dry cleaning without plastic unthinkable, but businesses who have done away with bags altogether in recent years show that it is a surprisingly viable option.

Dry cleaners that are reluctant to eliminate plastic bags entirely can instead make them optional. Such stores may post signs that say, “Request ‘No Plastic’ and we will happily hang your clothes without plastic wrap.” Alternatively, cleaners may offer a bag, but for a small fee, say between 10 and 20 cents. In so doing, they lead customers to expect that reuse or the absence of packaging are customary, which is the most sustainable of all possible options.



Reducing Plastic Cuts Down on Pollution... and Clutter

The bags and twist-ties associated with fresh dry cleaning may represent meticulous work on the part of a dry cleaner, but for customers they are an immediate source of hassle and clutter.

The barrier of wrapping and fasteners stops being attractive the moment it is time to access the clothes, at which point it prompts a few moments of fumbling that end in a wad of waste balled up in the trash. This scrunch of plastic garbage is poor product placement for cleaners, who have done the painstaking work of removing stains, odors, and wrinkles, only to have the most visible trace of their brand be a mass of plastic in the garbage.

Yet there are worse places for plastic film to wind up, and the public is increasingly aware of them. The sight of bags and wrappers blowing on roadsides, caught up in trees, and tangled in fences is a familiar part of the American landscape. So, too, are images of the impact this waste is having on wildlife. Photographs of animals harmed in this way are compelling and travel fast. Whether or not they are marked with a brand, dry cleaning polybags are highly recognizable to the consumer. For a dry cleaner that generates these bags, it may be difficult to imagine a worse circumstance for brand recognition or product placement.

Reusable garment bags not only eliminate this risk but are also reported to please customers by providing a way to return items such as hangers that might otherwise have become clutter and waste. Nearly all versions of the reusable dry cleaning bag contain a front pocket where clients can place hangers and twist ties that would otherwise have been discarded. This not only satisfies customers but generates savings. One business owner estimated the value of the hangers his customers now return at \$10,000 per year.¹²



Reducing Plastic Saves Money



The cost to replace plastic polybags with reusables can actually result in savings instead of a loss.

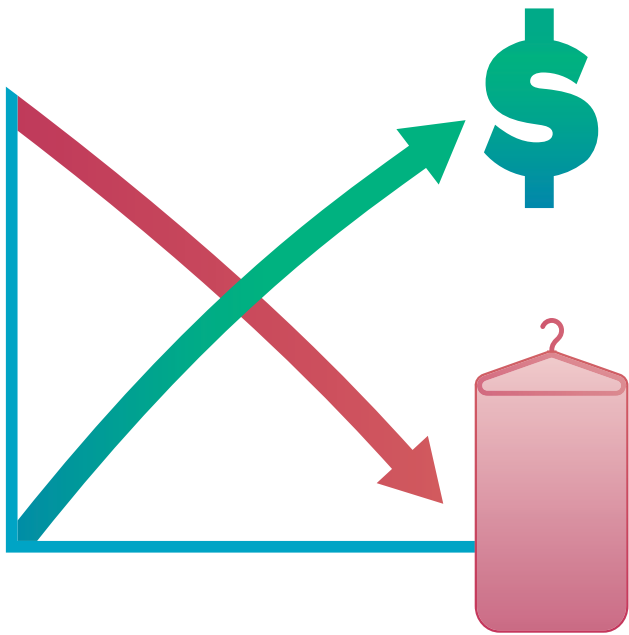
Think of it this way: A midsized dry cleaner has around 800 customers and typically uses about 25 rolls of polybag plastic per month. At a cost of \$45 per roll, this works out to \$1,125 a month, or \$13,500 per year. In a reusable system, most customers would receive two bags per household (to start), in order to be able to rotate between home and dry cleaner. The dry cleaner can either sell them the bag or take a deposit, covering their costs (and often adding a markup) and no longer needing to purchase as much poly film.

If the bags cost \$5 apiece, the total cost of replacing single-use film with reusables would be \$8,000. An operation that chose to give the bags away as a marketing tool for customer acquisition, absorbing 100% of the cost, would still save \$5,500, or about 40%, in the first year. This would not include money spent on twist ties, which at an average business will cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000 per year, and are not necessary with reusable bags. In every year that followed, the business would realize more savings. Moreover, the visible brand of the dry cleaning establishment on each bag would increase exposure and serve as advertising each time the bag was transferred from place to place.

Reusable bags are more labor intensive than an automatic polybagger, so more staff time would be needed. Some business owners have found that this cost nearly evens out the savings afforded by the reusable materials. Others find this not to be the case, particularly when they boost the goodwill of customers by “gifting” the reusable bags. One cleaner in Phoenix, Arizona, estimated a jump of nearly \$160,000 in extra revenue due to customer enthusiasm and a growing clientele.

“With the switch,” he reported, “the marketing is stupendous.”¹³

Reducing Plastic Boosts Revenue



Eliminating plastic bags creates a unique competitive advantage.

It is very rare in the dry cleaning industry to have something new that sets one's business apart, but business owners who have made the switch report a significant uptick in goodwill and a noticeable boost in business. David Meyer, who introduced reusable bags to his dry cleaning establishment in Phoenix, Arizona, described a dramatic increase in customer satisfaction and support. The availability of reusable bags sparked what he estimated to be a 10-15% jump in his business, and a series of positive, enthusiastic Google and Yelp reviews. "Those who liked it *really* liked it," he remarked. "You can't buy goodwill that cheaply." His experience set an example. Customers began to request reusable garment bags at both his own shop and those of competitors, who soon introduced them, as well.

Businesses that have ditched plastic should let everyone know!

Good news travels fast, but there are plenty of reasons to help it along, and many good ways to do so. It is important to take advantage of social media, databases, and in-store signage—anything that lets customers know that an establishment has taken steps to reduce plastic and improve sustainability. Businesses should not be shy about showing off their credentials as establishments that are moving beyond plastic.



Image of The Greener Dry Cleaner by LoHud courtesy Fred Mastroianni III

Shopfront Signage

For the majority of customers, the primary moment of interaction with an accustomed dry cleaner is when they drop off, pick up, or receive delivery of their garments. Dry cleaners should take advantage of that moment to communicate the changes in their business practice. Posting a sign in the window and behind the register to indicate a commitment to reducing waste can help immensely. Owners and managers can place table tents that repeat the message on the counter where money changes hands, and on any other prominent surface. People waiting to make a transaction, or even passing by on the street, will notice the announcement.



Cleaners can take advantage of their printed items, too. It can be useful to add a line to receipts and invoices, noting, “For the health of the planet, our business is proud to reduce its reliance on disposable plastic. Ask about our sturdy, reusable garment bags!” Cleaners that use paper capes or covers on their hangers may consider printing some that announce their reduction of plastic. “We love our customers and our planet. Receive your clothes without plastic!”

These messages should also be added to the businesses’ website and, if they use it, social media. Those that have accounts on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook can utilize popular hashtags to increase their visibility.

#PlasticPollutes #BreakFreeFromPlastic #ThinkReusable #PlasticFree #ChooseReuse #PlanetOrPlastic #WildlifeOverWaste #NoExcuseForSingleUse #RefuseSingleUse

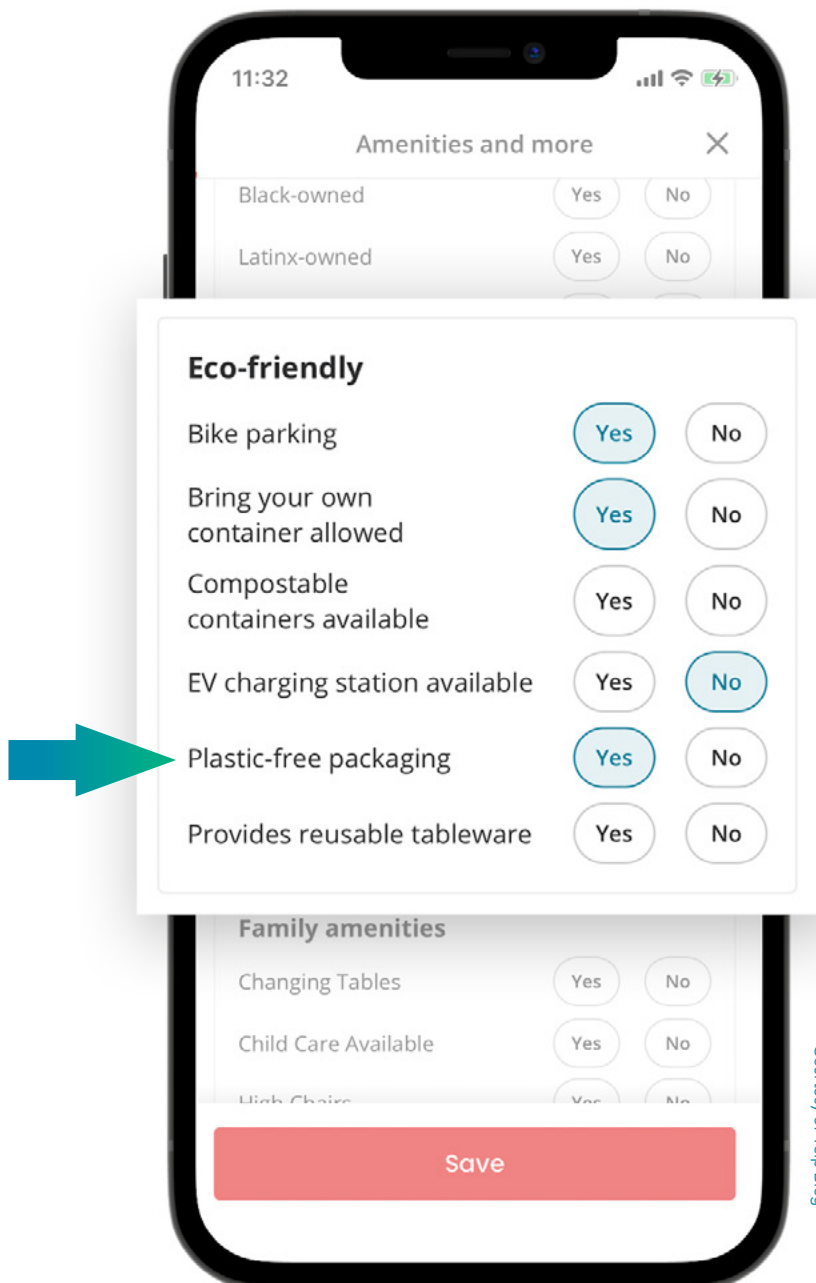
Tracking and sharing progress in reducing plastic waste is also an important way to communicate good intentions to customers. This can be done on social channels and on signage inside the store. A sign might say, for example, “After three months of offering reusable garment bags, we have prevented 600 lbs. of plastic film from entering the environment.”

Pro tip: a little humor paired with photos of wildlife will help rack up the “likes” and retweets. Cats run the internet, but dolphins and sea turtles do, too.

Make it Official

Businesses that do not yet have a listing on Yelp should be sure to **create one**, customizing the entry to include an announcement about their commitment to reducing single-use plastic. Cleaners can indicate the cost (if any) of a reusable garment bag and the benefits of using one. Those that add photos to their profiles receive more page views than those that do not, so owners and managers should consider uploading pictures of the reusable bags they have incorporated into their business models.

Businesses may also want to consider getting certified by Green America's Green Business Network if they meet certain criteria—learn more about the qualifications entailed [here](#). Businesses that offer wet cleaning services may also wish to apply for listing through [WetCleanersUSA](#) to broaden their reach, since many consumers seeking these cleaning services will also be interested in plastic-free cleaners.



Courtesy of Yelp Blog

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sixty-one percent of Americans rated sustainability as an important purchase criterion. (October 14, 2021). [“Recent Study Reveals More Than a Third of Global Consumers Are Willing to Pay More for Sustainability as Demand Grows for Environmentally-Friendly Alternatives,”](#) *Businesswire*.
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- 13 *Ibid.*

