

What are the impacts of Canada's single-use plastics ban on large restaurant chains nationwide?

1966 words

The usage of single-use plastics has become a topic of growing concern in Canada for over the past few years. A recent audit of the plastics industry, done by the federal government, showed that about 90% of all plastics produced in Canada ended up in landfills, the equivalent of 29,000 tonnes, or 2.3 billion plastic water bottles.¹ Mix this with the increased production of single-use plastics, and there is a huge environmental concern. Fortunately, the federal government, under the leadership of Justin Trudeau (leader of the Liberal party), has announced that they will go ahead with a national ban (effective as early as 2021) on single-use plastics, which will include cutlery, straws and drink stirrers.² Although this is a great sign for the environment, small businesses and large chains alike have voiced their concerns.

Personally, I consider myself to be an environmentalist as I strive to efficiently use the Earth's natural resources. Whether it is going paperless, walking and cycling more as a mode of transportation, or turning the heat down, I do whatever is in my power to put less strain on the environment. And so, in my opinion, this ban has been long overdue. Many other countries, even developing countries like Kenya and Bangladesh, have implemented bans similar to this and are already seeing the positive effects.³

However, it is important to look at the issue from the perspectives of all stakeholders. Even though this ban benefits the environment, the same cannot be said for businesses, especially fast-food restaurants, who rely on single-use straws, drink stirrers and cutlery to keep costs low and remain competitive in the market.

In order to understand this perspective, I needed to meet with people who share it, and that meant staying away from local members of the government (a majority of the MP's in my area are affiliated with the Liberal party and therefore their thoughts would not be reflective of business owners). To do this,

¹ Mia Rabson, "Single-Use Plastic Ban Coming in 2021 after Report Concludes There Is Evidence of Harm," CBC, January 30, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/environment-canada-report-plastics-ban-1.5445611>.

² "Canada to Ban Single-Use Plastics as Early as 2021," *BBC News*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48477087>.

³ Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh to Ban Use of Single-Use Plastic in Hotels and Restaurants," U.S. (Reuters, January 6, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-environment-plastic/bangladesh-to-ban-use-of-single-use-plastic-in-hotels-and-restaurants-idUSKBN1Z51BK>.

I decided to conduct interviews with general managers of Tim Hortons franchises, a fast-food chain quite prominent here in Toronto and across Canada. In an effort to reduce bias, I wanted to meet with more than one manager from different chains. Fortunately, I was able to get interview times with Michael Ruiz and Urvashi Pandya, two general managers of different Tim Hortons franchises here in Toronto. We had some really great discussions, as I was able to learn more about how they run their chains, their opinions on the proposed ban, how this ban will change the way they operate, as well as their view on the national effect this ban will have. To take the engagement a step further, I decided to send each manager a custom follow-up email where I recommended some approaches (according to the discussions that I had with them) to make sure the transition into the ban is smooth.

Before starting the interview from my end, I wanted to see whether the managers knew about the ban in general and what it entails for their restaurant. Although both Ruiz and Pandya knew that such a ban is coming into effect soon, this was surprisingly never communicated to them by their supervisors. Pandya even claimed that the supervisors were not informed at all. This was interesting, as many would assume all levels of management would be informed about a ban that would be affecting their business to such a great degree, but with the case of Tim Hortons, neither workers, managers, supervisors, and potentially executives were aware of the ban and ultimately, its effects on their business. After explaining the ban to both Ruiz and Pandya in more detail, I asked them whether they think this ban is important, and if yes, if it will be effective in its goal. Although they both were unaware about the statistics of plastic disposal in Canada and how big of an issue it is, somewhere they knew that it was something that needed to be addressed at some point. Ruiz did admit that the ban sounded like a nuisance, as it would require a lot of work from the government as well as restaurants to shift to a future without single-use plastics, but understood that it is the right thing to do, as getting rid of single-use plastics will have to be forced on the people in order for the ban to be effective. He mentioned that this “[single-use] plastics ban will have significant effects on the environment and the economy, and it will probably be for the better.” Pandya agreed, as she said “[we] are used to having single-use plastics around us, and so once this ban comes into

full effect, people will be forced to think more about their plastic consumption and find other ways to stir their drinks or eat their takeout food.”

It was quite evident that the primary concern for both Ruiz and Pandya was the negative effect that this ban would have on their restaurant, as they relied on single-use plastics to run their restaurant efficiently and remain competitive. They both admitted that they did not approve of the ban through the perspective of their jobs but were otherwise supportive of the government’s decision. Pandya mentioned in our discussion that she wanted the government to “introduce the ban in stages, so that restaurants and other businesses have [more] time to shift their operating methods.” Many restaurant owners across Canada agree with Pandya. Restaurants Canada, a not-for-profit association representing Canada’s food industry, has pleaded for policy patience, as they believe putting this ban into effect this early will negatively affect restaurants, and eventually, the economy.⁴ While discussing the use of plastics in his restaurant, Ruiz talked about consumers, revealing that many consciously avoided using disposable coffee cups by bringing in their own mugs or Tim Hortons mugs. This is indeed a national trend, as according to a study conducted by the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University, more than 83% of Canadians are motivated to reduce their use of single-use plastics because of their negative environmental impacts.⁵ Pandya, however, could not relate, as her restaurant saw no change when it came to straw, drink stirrer, or cups usage. We both agreed that this could be related to the demographic the restaurant serves, as her restaurant is situated near the suburbs of Mississauga (a city in the Greater Toronto Area), while Ruiz’s restaurant operates in the heart of Toronto. Mississauga is mostly home to the middle class while Toronto

⁴ “Canada’s Restaurant Owners Plead for Policy Patience in Proposed Federal Ban on Single-Use Plastics,” thestar.com (thestar.com, January 31, 2020), <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/01/31/canadas-restaurant-owners-plead-for-policy-patience-in-proposed-federal-ban-on-single-use-plastics.html>.

⁵ <https://strategyonline.ca/author/jdallaire>, “How Do Consumers Feel about Single-Use Plastic?,” strategy, June 7, 2019, <https://strategyonline.ca/2019/06/07/how-do-consumers-feel-about-single-use-plastic/>.

houses the upper class, and the study has found that people with higher incomes are generally more environmentally conscious than their counterparts.⁶

Through the interviews, I gained a lot more insight on the ban and specifically, how it may affect fast-food chain Tim Hortons. Ruiz and Pandya both voiced concerns regarding potential changes in operating methods, helping customers adapt to these changes, and the overall financial implications for their restaurants. After the interviews (having taken lots of notes and pointers down), I felt that I should give them some recommendations and potential solutions to their problems that they would be able to implement in the short term. I recognized that it would be quite difficult to recommend operating changes as I was not knowledgeable enough to give them advice on actually running their business, but when it came to helping customers adapt, I had some ideas. I recommended Pandya and Ruiz to develop signs and posters to place beside straws, cups and drink stirrers and put forward the idea that these things will not be offered in the near future. This will give enough time for consumers to adapt and the transition into the ban will be a lot smoother. I also recommended that they launch a discount program, where if the customer brings in a reusable mug for their drinks, they will be eligible for a 15% discount on their total purchase. This would provide customers with an incentive to bring in their reusable mugs (as the discounts would eventually pay for the mug itself).

Through my engagement that looked at the plastics ban at a local level (within Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area), I also wanted to try and understand the nationwide effect of the ban and what it would entail for Canada's restaurants and its economy. To begin, I quickly realized that Tim Hortons and many of its main competitors (Burger King Canada, A&W Canada, Starbucks Canada, etc.) would largely face the same issues, as they are all large fast-food chains and rely on single-use plastics to run their business. Given current market prices, business models and the overall low cost of disposal, there is little

⁶ "Canada's Restaurant Owners Plead for Policy Patience in Proposed Federal Ban on Single-Use Plastics," thestar.com (thestar.com, January 31, 2020), <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/01/31/canadas-restaurant-owners-plead-for-policy-patience-in-proposed-federal-ban-on-single-use-plastics.html>.

financial incentive for restaurants to switch to operating without single-use plastics, and if this ban is implemented, it will result in short-term financial losses for these restaurants.⁷ This can potentially be a cause for resistance, and Restaurants Canada has articulated this fear, but the Canadian government has assured them that a zero plastic economy would deliver significant benefits to Canadian restaurants and the Canadian economy in the coming future.⁸

It looks like the final verdict on embracing the single-use plastics ban in Canada is not as straightforward as I thought. Both the Canadian government and restaurants are correct in their own ways and it is not easy to decide who the winner of the argument is. After all, restaurants are worried about their profits which can hurt the economy, and the government is worried about sustainable development, something that cannot be overlooked either. Through my research prior to my engagement activity, I discovered that the government introduced this ban on the basis of sound evidence that clearly communicates a need to re-evaluate our plastics usage. On the other hand, my interviews with Michael Ruiz and Urvashi Pandya allowed me to see the other side of the story, where restaurants are concerned about their future in the industry and how they will fare without single-use plastics, something they depend quite heavily on. I do believe that I could have gone even further by arranging interviews with general managers of other restaurant chains, or by meeting MP's of the opposition to truly understand the issue from multiple perspectives.

But all in all, my engagement activity really opened my eyes to the difficulties faced by organizations, governments, and individuals when they seek to initiate change. Many Canadians criticized the government for not introducing the single-use plastics ban earlier (including myself), but we also did

⁷ Selina Lee-Anderson, "Making the Case for a Zero Plastic Waste Economy: Canada Moves to Ban Single-Use Plastics in an Effort to Reduce Plastic Pollution," McCarthy Tétrault (McCarthy, July 12, 2019), <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/insights/blogs/canadian-era-perspectives/making-case-zero-plastic-waste-economy-canada-moves-ban-single-use-plastics-effort-reduce-plastic-pollution>.

⁸ Selina Lee-Anderson, "Making the Case for a Zero Plastic Waste Economy: Canada Moves to Ban Single-Use Plastics in an Effort to Reduce Plastic Pollution," McCarthy Tétrault (McCarthy, July 12, 2019), <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/insights/blogs/canadian-era-perspectives/making-case-zero-plastic-waste-economy-canada-moves-ban-single-use-plastics-effort-reduce-plastic-pollution>.

not look at the problem from the other sides' perspective (restaurants). What seems right from one standpoint may look wrong from the other, and it is this difference that causes resistance. However, this resistance can be overcome by developing a solution which satisfies all stakeholders, and soon enough, creating change may not seem that difficult after all.

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