Chapter 11

“No Plastic Bag” Campaign of Malaysia

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If we do not permit the earth to produce beauty and joy, it will in the end not produce food, either.

— Joseph Wood Krutch

The Moment of Truth…

Azmir Hassan, the managing director of ForU, a famous hypermarket in Malaysia, was thinking about the recent change in plastic bag use. By following Malaysian government’s ruling about banning the use of plastic bags, some customers started to complain while paying in the counter for their grocery items, fruits, and vegetables.

Previously, all supermarkets, department stores, and hypermarkets in Malaysia used to provide free plastic bags to the customers to carry the purchased things. However, by realizing the negative impact of plastic bag use in the long run, the Malaysian government started to impose rules and regulations on plastic bag use since 2011. One of such efforts was “no plastic bags on Saturday” campaign which was strictly implemented in Selangor (see Exhibit 1). Since early 2018, the government extended this ruling in all weekdays. Following this ruling, the shopping malls stopped providing free plastic bags to carry customers’ purchases. Thus, customers were responsible to bring their own bags during their shopping or they were to pay 20 sen\(^1\) if they were to buy any plastic bag (see Exhibit 2).

Azmir received many complaints from his frontline cashiers about customers’ arguments and harsh words in this regard. Nissa, one of his staff shared him that the customers still buying plastic bags instead of bringing their own bag

\(^1\)Sen represents Malaysian coin.
while coming for purchasing their groceries or fruits and vegetables. Some of the comments even curtly commented, why it is too difficult to provide a cheap plastic bag instead of charging money for it when he is paying RM 493 to purchase their products.

Exhibit 1. No Plastic Bag Campaign Extended from Weekend to All Weekdays. *Source:* Author’s own image.

Exhibit 2. Customers are Responsible to Bring Their Own Bags during Their Shopping. *Source:* Author’s own image.
While remembering all these remarks, Azmir was thinking about this initiative whether there is any other way to make people aware about the threat of plastic bag use and to make them accept the situation wholeheartedly.

**Malaysian Government’s Environmental Concern**

During the last century, plastic bags were found very useful in carrying and packaging goods. However, it became a real threat to environment, human health, and quality of life. Plastic waste is life-threatening since it destroys the ecosystems. The production of plastic has increased enormously in the last century. In 1869, global plastic production rose from around two million tonnes a year to 380 million tonnes (Economist, 2018) which is expected to increase by 2036 (Cho, 2012) to an alarming rate. One of the negative consequences of this global revolution in the plastic industry is that it is non-ablative for degradation in natural ways resulting in accumulation over the years and has often been disposed of in landfills, oceans, or natural environment. According to the Economist (2018), 6.3 billion tonnes produced since plastic was discovered, and 12% waste was burned and only 9% was recycled.

The plastic bag takes over 1,000 years to break down if it is not recycled (The World Counts, 2014). Moreover, most of the plastic wastes enter the ocean that affect marine wildlife or buried under the ground that causes environmental disasters. The government of Malaysia has taken it seriously to get rid of wastes by recycling, composting, incineration, inert landfill, and sanitary landfill (Periatham, Fauziah, & Khidzir, 2009). Malaysians spend 60% of their annual budget on waste disposal services. However, 80% of dumpsites in Malaysia will be filled the capacity of landfill in less than two years (The Sun Daily, 2006). Recycling is one of the better options in dealing with waste (Nair, 2018). Thus, government started to find alternative ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle the waste by involving the public.

Malaysia is an exporter of major petrochemical products. It led Malaysian plastic industry to become one of the most growing industries in the manufacturing sector (Choo, 2018). Malaysia’s plastic industry has been ranked among the most competitive industries in Asia (Malaysian Investment Development Authority, 2016). Malaysia is considered as the eighth largest producer of plastic wastes (Jambeck, 2015; Loh, 2018). The average use of plastic bag is 300 bags per year. In average, two plastic bags are used per person per day (Bavani & Mei, 2016).

**“No Plastic Bag” Initiative**

Malaysia started banning the plastic bag in 2011 under the campaign name “No plastic bags on Saturday.” Selangor, the second state in Malaysia, followed this campaign strictly (Malaysian Digest, 2017). It started to have plastic bag-free weekend on every Saturday and then Sunday and finally extended to weekdays. Penang, Sabah, and Sarawak states have launched a similar campaign.
Under this ruling, customers were required to pay 20 sen (RM0.20) for each plastic bag on Saturdays. On 2017, the campaign was expanded in Malaysia’s Federal Territories (Loh, 2018; Retail Asia, 2017) to no plastic bag in all weekdays in search of a solution to environmental problems. The 20 sen charged for each plastic bag would be used for charity, donation to orphanage, consumerism projects, and environmental and wildlife protection (Eighty Quartier, 2017). Also, the government imposed a penalty of RM1,000 on retailers and vendors if they still used plastic bags while packaging the purchased goods for the customers (Balakrishnan, 2016). The alternative eco-friendly bag concept was introduced, and customers were encouraged to purchase eco-bags.

That effort to reduce the use of plastic bag was meant to reduce the plastic waste. Initially, Saturday was chosen to ban the plastic bag because it was expected that Saturday would be a very effective day to get the message across to a wider crowd (Kamaruddin & Yusuf, 2012). The government promoted this campaign by posters, banners, newspapers, and via other promotional activities (Surach, 2017) to the community in order to gain support from stores, supermarkets, grocery, and all other retailers in Selangor. This campaign tried to create public awareness about environmental suffering due to plastic waste and the consequences of not properly disposed plastic bags and to encourage shoppers to follow this act strictly.

Consumer’s Reaction

The impact of “no plastic bag” campaign has provoked a range of reactions, attitude, and behavior from public including plastic industry, consumers, markets, and shop owners. Azmir recalled that he read an interesting article in the newspaper about the types of shoppers. The study assessed the effect of the campaign on plastic bag charges in Selangor. Two hundred and fifty-three consumers were interviewed at hypermarkets and supermarkets. The study came up with four types of consumers based on shopping practices — the green shoppers, the campaign supporters, strategic green shoppers, and plastic bag charge shoppers (Zen, 2018). Another study found that there are three types of anti-consumption behavior — fully anti-consumption, partial anti-consumption, and no anti-consumption those who resent and dissatisfied with the no plastic bag campaign (Zen, Ahamad, & Omar, 2013). This study showed that public is supporting the campaign and showing positive reaction; the level of awareness is increasing by reducing the usage of plastic bags to help in creating a better environment for future generation. However, there are partial anti-consumption and anti-consumption behavior exist. Azmir was wondering how to convince these two groups of consumers to accept no plastic bag campaign.

Some consumers keep the eco-friendly bag inside their car for emergency if they need to go shopping at any time. While other consumers pay for plastic bag during purchase, they feel guilty by thinking that they are harming the environment, some other consumers are hard core environmentally friendly. Such
consumers bring their own fabric bags with them while shopping in supermarkets and hypermarkets.

Azmir realized that still some consumers are not aware about the reason behind charging 20 sen for each plastic bag by the stores. Perhaps the promotional effort was needed to be carried out for long time. Azmir remembered, Arif, his 19-year-old son was discussing about his friends’ eco-friendly shopping behavior. One of his son’s friends Iqbal uses eco-bag because his parents follow “green living” concept and encourage him to use eco-bag so he brings his own bag every time he visits grocery store and if he forget, he pay for eco-bags not for plastic bag. He mentioned that he first came to know about the campaign through some posts in Facebook and Social Media not from the supermarket or grocery stores in Malaysia. However, Adnan was less responsive in response to this campaign. He does not mind to pay for purchasing plastic bag since 20 sen is not a big amount. According to him, unless the amount paid by consumer is increased, they will never stopped using it. Adnan felt that it is not enough to discourage using plastic bags, it is also important to offer alternative eco-bags with cheap price. Devan, the other Indian friend, mentioned that “the problem is not that I have to buy them now, but the fact that I could no longer reuse plastic bags we used to get on shopping trips. Those reusable plastic bags had been our saviour all these years. We reused them as bin liners, dog waste carriers and even barf and so on.” Similarly, Brian, one of Arif’s Chinese friends, mentioned that he heard that banning plastic bags could create a new environmental problem as more trees were being cut down to make paper packaging. Azmir also read similar thing in the newspaper that it takes 2.2 times more energy and 4.7 times the amount of water to make paper, as compared to producing plastic bags. Moreover, paper production resulted in 3.1 times more greenhouse gases (Menon, 2017).

Azmir’s Concern…

The government invested a great effort to introduce no plastic bag campaign to discourage the use of plastic bags and to limit the large amount of plastic waste in Malaysia. The impact of no plastic bag day campaign has provoked a range of reactions, attitude, and behavior from public including plastic industry, consumers, markets, and shop owners. The campaign goal was to increase the awareness of the environmental problems that brought by plastic products and to implement the ways to encourage the public to preserve the environment. Nevertheless, the recycling business continues to thrive.

Azmir realized that although there is positive movement, some consumers still do not reciprocate to this campaign positively. He felt that the current charge of 20 sen per plastic bag is counterproductive, especially since many are willing to buy plastic bag. If they did not have this option, people would have to remember to bring reusable bags on their shopping trips. Another way of reducing the use of plastic bags could be through education. The text books at school, colleges, and university should discuss about the benefits of using eco-bags and the devastating consequence of the use of plastic bags in the long run. Not only
this, the alternative eco-friendly bags should be available and need to be offered at a reasonable price. Also, more aggressive promotional effort should be considered to make citizens aware of this issue. Azmir felt that unless citizens are aware about the deadly impact of plastic use on the earth and human existence, they will neither stop purchasing and using plastic bags, nor they will accept the government’s noble effort properly.

References


