

Japan ignores this 'message in a bottle'

Guest Forum

By CHRISTIAN SCHWARZENEGGER

At first sight, the Japanese beverage industry seems to live up to higher standards of recycling than many other countries; almost all of its products are sold in containers bearing a triangular or round-shaped recycling icon.

For a European, it is surprising to learn that most of these containers end up in waste plants instead of being processed and reused. Unlike glass bottles, there is no separate collection of PET bottles which have swept the market in recent years. Furthermore, it seems Japanese producers and retailers are reluctant to participate in setting up a more environmentally-friendly recycling system, thus transferring the main responsibility to local communities and, in the end, taxpayers.

This calls for swift action by the government to put effective legislation into place. Such legislation can be highly successful, as examples in Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Scandinavian countries show. As early as 1990, Switzerland pushed through legislation on beverage containers which introduced a legal maximum of nonrecycled waste, that is, the total volume ending up in waste plants, for each of four container categories most often used for beverages (glass, aluminum, sheet-steel and PET). No sanctions were introduced, but in case the industry failed to meet these targets, tighter measures were envisioned. These included introducing a general deposit system in which customers have to pay a so-called "deposit" of

Y50 per container which is reimbursed on returning it empty, or putting the industry under the obligation to take back all containers.

This legislation has led the previously reluctant beverage industry to establish a national network for collecting and recycling empty containers. The recycling rates for 1996 are impressive: glass 89 percent, aluminum 87 percent and PET 79 percent. Due to a sharp increase in the use of PET containers however, the volume of nonrecycled PET bottles has exceeded the legally defined limit. A discussion is under way as to whether stricter rules should apply for PET containers, as they gradually supersede traditional multiple-use glass bottles.

The industry contends that, from an ecological point of view, neither of the two recycling approaches, (single-use and technical reprocessing or multiple-use and washing), is superior. Nevertheless, Sweden has already opted for the latter. Their compulsory deposit system for single-use containers discourages beverage companies and retailers from selling their products in such bottles. The benefit of this is that Sweden's recycling rates are slightly higher than those in Switzerland, though costs for the recycling infrastructure are higher.

A new directive enacted by the European Union commits all member states to introduce a flexible recycling system based on return rates for every category of packaging material. Contrary to the fixed limits in the Swiss model, this gives the beverage industry more freedom to select and change the optimum material and does not favor multiple-use containers. It remains to be seen whether this elastic model will be able to raise the

lower recycling standards of some southern member states.

The difference between Japan on the one hand and Sweden or Switzerland on the other hand is very visible: Almost all retailers in these two countries have separate disposal boxes for empty containers of all sorts; a deposit system is in use for large, multiple-use bottles in which specialized machinery automatically counts and assembles bottles, then prints pay slips for the customers; aluminum cans are compressed by a kind of gambling machine where customers can win a prize, to name only a few examples.

Complemented by a fee system for waste bags, these legislative measures help to bring about a waste-processing system which is environmentally friendly and requires the waste producer to foot most of the bill for waste removal. Conversely, under the current Japanese system, the beverage industry and retailers profit from hidden state subsidies where tax payers' money is used for the removal of this industry's waste, whether in the form of domestic waste or as bottle and can litter in the environment. Additionally, those consumers who try to minimize waste receive no benefits at all.

Japanese society is well known for its cleanliness and discipline. Predictably, legislative steps similar to those described above would quickly lead to a very efficient neighborhoods and a better harmony with nature. Hopefully, the Japanese authorities will soon pick up this "message in a bottle."

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