

## Redefining Sustainability for Japan

Sep 2, 2021 | Yuri Endo

According to [the latest report](#) from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), there is no doubt that humans have been warming the planet and that unless emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are significantly reduced in the next few decades, the planet will warm by 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius or more within the 21st century. Echoing the scientists' findings, UN Secretary General António Guterres said no country can afford to delay or make excuses for its actions. Especially for Japan, which has [the world's second worst plastic waste](#) per capita and is also [one of the places most affected](#) by climate change, [a new plastic garbage reduction law](#) going into effect next spring is too little, while many consumers are personally taking action to live more sustainably.

Our Visual GPS research conducted before the pandemic revealed that most Japanese consumers believed that the way we treat our planet will have a major impact on our future, but were unable to find concrete ways to lead a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle other than to recycle. However, our research conducted *after* the pandemic revealed that now, most consumers have questioned the government's environmental measures and are reconsidering their recycling habits, and are making personal efforts to reduce their carbon footprints.

72% of Japanese consumers think companies should consider the environment in all their advertising and communications

72% of Japanese consumers said that companies should consider the environment in all their advertising and communications, even if their products and services are not directly related to the environment. This clearly shows that people are looking for a sustainable attitude not only in their personal lives, but also in companies and brands. In addition to that, they also place importance on whether a company respects human rights and has appropriate labor practices at all stages of the supply chain. Some consumers also responded that they are four times more likely to pay for a company with a holistic sustainable approach when making purchasing decisions. Therefore, the visuals that accurately incorporate sustainability can have a significant impact on consumers' call to action for better future.

However, the visuals currently used by many Japanese companies and brands to show sustainability do not capture sustainable lifestyles and efforts accurately. For example, in 2020, Getty Images' most popular imagery included many clichés such as two hands cupping a plant, smoke coming out of a chimney, and a polar bear. When we see these visuals, we associate them with environmental issues, but

they are projected as abstract, unrelated to human beings, not as a call to action, and these images are overused to the point that they have lost their impact.

So, how do we truly begin addressing these observations in order for us as a collective to be more environmentally and socially responsible? Against a backdrop of fake news and content oversaturation, we as consumers can be unknowingly influenced by the visuals we see every day, and misled by greenwashing. It is important for each of us to understand the meaning of sustainable consumption and ethical living through visuals in order to prevent further deterioration of the global environment. For companies and brands, distinguishing genuine messages from corporate greenwashing in your communication is key.

**When choosing visuals of the sustainable lifestyles and efforts, ask yourself:**

**Are you visualizing the familiar efforts that encourage sustainability?**

Are all people, from young to old, using eco-friendly products such as reusable bags and bottles instead of one-use products? It is these tiny details that, as consumers, we are noticing in particular when it comes to sustainability. The accumulation of these small efforts count in helping to protect the global environment, as Japan must go further to build a social system that does not require disposable containers or packaging in the name of good customer service.

**Are you visualizing solutions to bring change in the environment?**

We have finally started seeing an increase in the number of bulk stores, or stores where you can bring your own bags and containers to buy daily necessities in Japan. The development of synthetic meat, self-sufficient living, eco-friendly homes that utilize renewable energy and lifestyles choices to conserve electricity and water power can actually be seen by consumers, which can lead to a call to action. Showcase initiatives that represent a cohesive engagement to reduce consumption, such as the [zero waste town](#) (visible in one of the above images, shot by JGalione).

**Are you visualizing the latest technologies to help realize a sustainable society?**

For example, e-health is said to be a great support for patients, while at the same time easing the burden on healthcare professionals and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It is also important to visualize how new zero-emission advancements and innovations such as solar power, wind power, electric vehicles and carbon-neutral solutions to fit into real life, so that everyone can easily imagine how to use and benefit from them.