

Sustainable Innovation Portrait

Pete He, Laundry & Home Care, United States

Pete He, Senior Research Fellow, explains Henkel's new commitment to reduce the water volume in Purex liquid laundry detergent and why collaboration with Walmart and other stakeholders is critical to gaining market acceptance.

Pete, please tell us about Henkel's latest Purex commitment.

In May this year, Henkel committed to reduce the amount of water in each dose of our Purex liquid laundry detergent by 25 percent over the next four years. This is a tremendous step forward, because reducing the water volume in Purex will save as much as 30 million gallons of water annually.

We made this announcement in support of Walmart's laundry-products compaction initiative at their 2014 Sustainable Product Expo in Bentonville, Arkansas.

How will the new product compare to its predecessor?

The idea is very much in line with our sustainability strategy of achieving more with less. While conventional liquid laundry detergents contain 60 to 90 percent water, a concentrated one could contain as little as 15 to 50 percent water.

This innovation will enable us to conserve energy and reduce natural resource depletion as well. Less water means less volume will be transported from our production sites to distribution centers and retail stores. Less water also implies less plastic packaging materials, which are mostly derived from petroleum sources.

What's more, our customers won't have to compromise on performance. The new concentrated Purex laundry detergent will provide more cleaning power per dose and be significantly more effective than its predecessor.

How was the idea for this innovation first developed?

From a Henkel perspective, concentrated detergents are not a new innovation. We have actually been working on superior technologies for increasingly concentrated liquid laundry detergents at Henkel for a number of years now.

However, selling these products is not as straightforward as it may sound. Shelf appearance is a major challenge. If our concentrated detergents appear smaller next to conventional products that cost the same amount, customers may think "I'm getting less value for my money." It is counterintuitive for them.

So gaining market acceptance requires the support and concerted efforts of retail customers like Walmart and its manufacturing suppliers, as well as consumer education. This is why our work within The Sustainability Consortium is so important. The Consortium provides a valuable platform where we

work together with stakeholders – ranging from Walmart to NGOs, leading universities and our peers – to set up common measurement and reporting standards, and pursue a common business goal.

Interestingly, although the innovation involves a reduction in water volumes, Walmart and The Sustainability Consortium have made concentrating liquid laundry detergents a priority due to its significant potential in CO₂ emissions reductions, mostly due to less transportation and packaging.

What has been Walmart's response to the commitment?

Our North American retail partners such as Walmart are very pleased about Henkel's sustainability leadership. In fact, Walmart has recognized Henkel with sustainability awards in four of the last six years. Our customers view Henkel as a sustainability leader thanks to our strong business performance and our willingness to bring scientific know-how and a balanced approach.

What advice on innovative thinking can you share with others?

Sustainability is a long journey. We need to adapt our products and business practices, and we all need to become true believers. I encourage and recommend that everyone at Henkel become a trained and qualified sustainability ambassador, and look at their daily activities through the lens of sustainability. Be creative, collaborative and take actions to trigger changes in the near-term and long-term accordingly.