

SANDRA NOONAN JOINED JUST SALAD WITH A MISSION TO BETTER THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOD AND THE PLANET.



# The Sustainability Savant

Just Salad's Sandra Noonan is proof one fast casual is taking environmental issues to heart. But she's ready to start a broader movement.

/ BY DANNY KLEIN

**S**andra Noonan doesn't typically cold email CEOs. But she recognized something about Just Salad the company itself likely didn't. In the emerging conversation on circularity, the New York City-based salad chain was a decade ahead. This was 2019, about 13 years from when Nick Kenner and childhood friend Rob Crespi debuted the brand as a way to serve healthy, quick food in a market that lacked accessibility. The goal, as Kenner said then, to become the "Trader Joe's of fast food," or a restaurant where organic on the menu didn't signal breaking the bank.

A year earlier, Noonan read an article in the *New Yorker* on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (the largest of five offshore plastic accumulation zones in the world's oceans) and was disgusted. She took one statistic, in particular, to mind—a finding in *Science Magazine* that claimed 275 million metric tons of plastic waste was generated across 192 coastal countries. "I had a, 'I did not sign up for this moment' as a consumer," Noonan says. "And started doing more research and learned that only 9 percent of all plastic has ever been recycled, according to scientific literature."

It made her think of Just Salad. In addition to Kenner's aim to bulldoze barriers to healthy food, he devised a reusable container prototype in hopes of limiting the plastic salad vessels stuffing waste baskets throughout the city.

Kenner and Just Salad execs oversaw the program, yet they also were trying to run a growing restaurant chain that had scaled to about 40 stores (there are 60 today). Naturally, one often preceded the other.

LIZ EIDELMAN





Earlier in her career, Noonan served as VP of digital strategy at Morgan Stanley’s Institute for Sustainable Investing. She also worked as a reporter with Bloomberg, independent marketing consultant, and adjunct instructor at NYU’s School of Professional Studies. But when she came upon Just Salad’s reusable bowl, Noonan was spending all of her free time on an advocacy group she founded in 2019 called Zero Waste NYC, which had grown to a few hundred members.

“He answered within a day,” Noonan says of her email.

Kenner told Noonan to come by and trade thoughts. So she slipped out of work one day and took the subway to Just Salad’s Manhattan HQ. “I didn’t really know what I was doing there,” she says. “But I said listen, I am really passionate about this reusable bowl program ... I realized that he was totally engrossed in what I was saying.” A few months later, Kenner asked Noonan to join in. She accepted on the spot, which is how the fast casual became one of the few (it’s challenging to find any) restaurant brands in America to employ a chief sustainability officer in its C-suite.

What Noonan wanted to accomplish from the outset was increase the cultural relevance of reusables—to tell Just Salad’s story and how it all connects with a broader dilemma. In a 2021 report by United Nations Environment Programme, an estimated 931 million tons of food waste was generated in 2019, globally. The U.S. throws away more than any other country in the world, with nearly 80 billion pounds of food wasted per year, an estimated 30-40 percent of the country’s entire food supply.

Nearly 9 million tons of single-use food service items are used every year, too, equivalent to the weight of 25 Empire State Buildings.

Circling the restaurant sector, per the USDA, the industry loses \$162 billion annually thanks to wasted food.

Right away, Kenner asked Noonan to help Just Salad along many of these fronts, starting with composting. And it’s only gained over the years. Eco-labeling; a Sustainability Champion program for in-store staff; becoming the first U.S. chain to display carbon labels on its menu.

Before exploring some of Just Salad’s nuanced directives, it’s worth pulling back. Noonan says the chain, and restaurants as a whole, are only scratching the surface on storytelling when it comes to climate. It’s taken years, but the ceiling is nowhere in sight.

Still, the juncture at hand holds promise. One reason being sustainability, reusables, and other environmental top-

ics got buried over the past couple of years by COVID-19. Just for restaurants, the rush to serve off-premises guests—often with single-use plastics—raced ahead on the priority chart. But similar to how consumers tapped comfort food early and have begun to return to health-minded goals, the same is true of watching their environmental impact, Noonan says.

A study from Unilever showed 72 percent of U.S. diners care about how restaurants handle food waste. Forty-seven percent added they’d spend more at restaurants with an active food recovery program.

**A CHANGING MESSAGE, WILLING CONSUMER**

While that might be anecdotal in scope, Noonan says hard data is where change is really beginning to unfold. It’s central to sustainability communication with customers, she adds, almost to the point where calling this directive “storytelling” doesn’t fit anymore. “It might imply spinning a story,” Noonan says.

“That’s not what we’re talking about at Just Salad.”

Here’s an example: It took Just Salad roughly a year to run a third-party environmental impact assessment with the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology to measure its reusable bowl benefits compared to disposable containers. The goal being to capture the “break-even point,” or number of times the bowl must be used for its impact to be less than fiber disposable bowls. To do so, the LCA evaluated the carbon emissions and water use associated with each bowl at each stage of its life cycle.

The LCA showed, on average, Just Salad’s reusable bowl resulted in lower global warming (greenhouse gas emissions) and water consumption impacts than disposable fiber bowls after two uses.

Alter three, the global warming impact was equivalent to 42 percent of the impact of the fiber bowl. Four in and it dropped to 34 percent. With water consumption, the impact after three uses measured to 55 percent that of the fiber bowl, while after four, it fell to 46 percent, on average.

Perhaps the most concise and repeatable way to explain it—and share with guests—is a customer who washes and reuses their bowl once per week for an entire year could create 89 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions and use 78 percent less water, on average, compared to the same number of uses of disposable fiber bowls, according to calculations published in Just Salad’s impact report.



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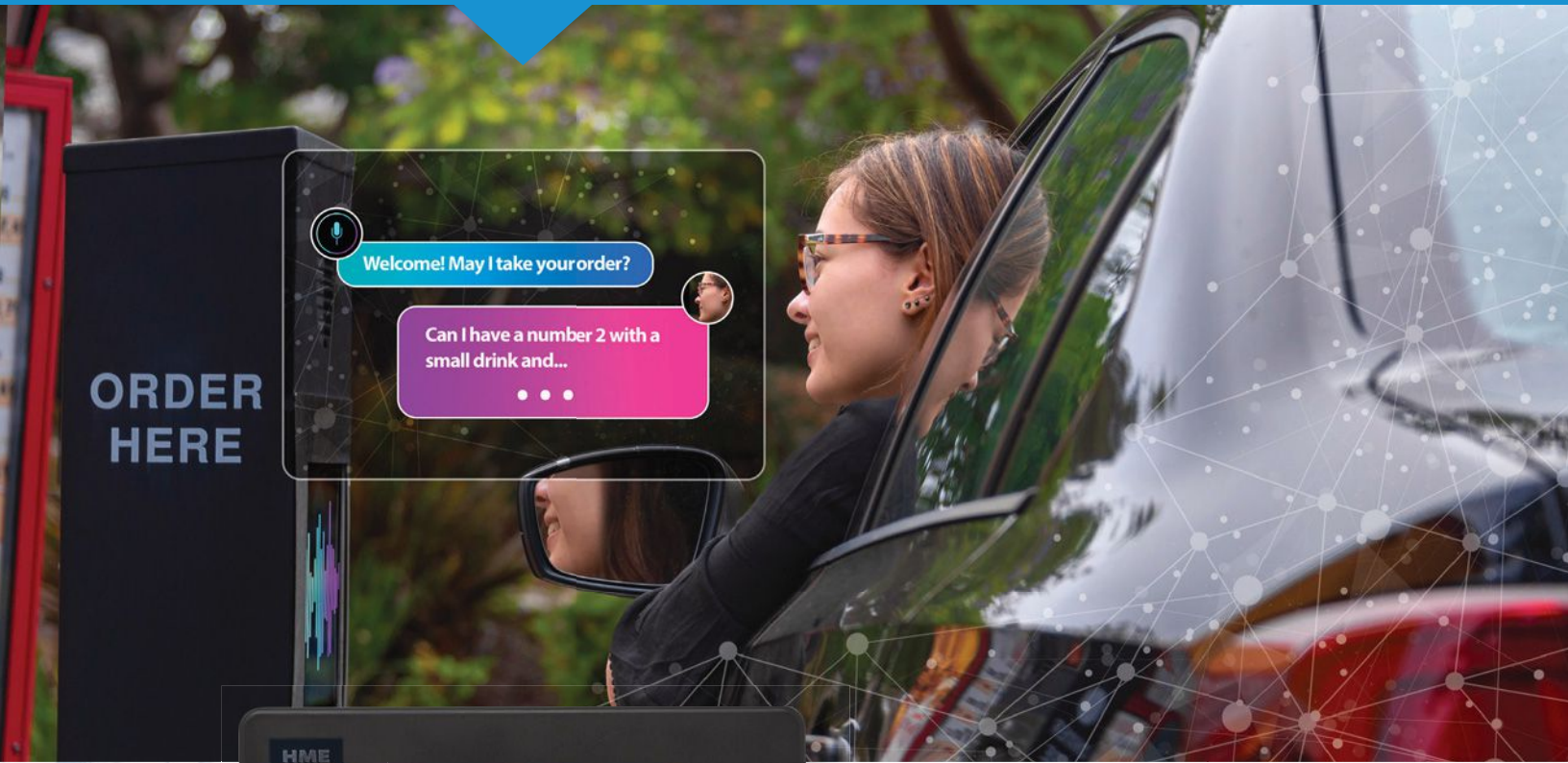


In 2021, as part of an internal audit guided by SASB (Sustainable Accounting Standards

Board) standards, Just Salad estimated 91 percent of its disposable food service packaging was made from recycled and/or renewable materials, and 90 percent of its packaging was recyclable, reusable, and/or compostable.

In an effort to provide multiple ways for customers to access reusable packaging solutions, Just Salad expanded its partnership with Deliver Zero to offer reusable containers for pickup and delivery orders on DoorDash and Caviar. Through Deliver Zero, customers can choose to have their order built in a reusable DeliverZero container. Then, they can return it to the Just Salad location they ordered from or any store within the DeliverZero network.

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## LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

It was a painstaking, lengthy effort, Noonan says. Yet invaluable. Just Salad has offered reusable bowls since the opening of its first location, making it home to one of the longest running programs in the U.S. restaurant industry. How could the brand turn a trait into a movement?

Over the years, Just Salad's "MyBowl" guests purchase the signature blue bowl for \$1, and the chain gives them a free topping each time they use it.

The impact last year measured at more than 3 tons of single-use plastic bowl waste avoided. Keeping to a Big Apple theme, you could have stacked enough single-use plastic bowls to create a tower 15 times taller than the Empire State Building.

Also, amid the pandemic, Just Salad launched a pilot program at a Murray Hill store that offered guests a way to access reusable bowls for online pickup orders. Just Salad's "BringBack" platform enabled customers to receive their online salads in a green reusable bowl and return it to a restaurant, where Just Salad employees took care of the washing. The brand expanded the platform to Midtown and initial analysis found BringBack users ordered from stores twice as frequently per week versus non-BringBack guests. As this scales, Just Salad plans to make it available on the company's mobile app.

The data story, however, continues to thread throughout. Not just in Just Salad's decision-making, but also in the way it's courting customer frequency.

Leaders met with Anna Keller, a PhD candidate in environmental psychology at the University of Central Lancashire, who has published research on the various stages of behavior change during an individual's transition from single-use to reusable cups, to tap her methodology. Just Salad then surveyed customers and found 65 percent were interested in using fewer single-use containers, yet either have not started reducing, did not know how, or didn't think it was possible.

Just Salad also enlisted the help of eco-rapper and content creator, Hila the Killa, to leverage influencer marketing.

To put it plainly, Just Salad is spreading its message with more ammo than ever. "Data is the foundation of good story telling," Noonan says. "And I think before Just Salad had a CSO, it didn't have the bandwidth or resources to do that. ... I think the next two or so years at Just Salad we're going to be able to talk about the benefits of reuse in a much more data-cen-



### BRING YOUR OWN CUP:

Last year, Just Salad relaunched its Bring Your Own Cup (BYOC) program for smoothie orders, giving customers the choice to avoid single-use paper cups.



### SINGLE-USE UTENSIL OPT-OUT:

On the Just Salad app and orderjustsalad.com, customers are asked to indicate yes or no for disposable utensils. Just Salad offers a 10-cent discount on delivery orders that opt-out of utensils. In 2021, the utensil opt-out feature on orderjustsalad.com avoided over 2,200 pounds of unnecessary waste.



### DINE-IN BOWLS:

Often in fast casual, customers receive their orders in disposable packaging even if they plan to dine on-site. Just Salad continues to introduce dine-in bowls at locations with sufficient seating capacity.

tric way." Noonan does want to make one point clear, though—Just Salad doesn't show up and say, "the customer wants more sustainability from us." Although feedback and demand are always golden eggs to chase in hospitality, a topic like sustainability—akin to diversity—is one that idles if there's no driving force. "We come in every day and we say, 'we're doing sustainability,'" she says. "And brands need to lead."

This is a critical notion, Noonan adds, in understanding where restaurants go from here. Simply by having a CSO, Just Salad is sending a message that it's going to try to skate ahead versus responding only when consumers ask for it.

However, there is an intersection. "For 16 years, we've had a very loyal cohort of consumers who have used the reusable bowl millions of times," Noonan says.

Would Just Salad have witnessed this kind of activity and stability if not for the fact it gives free toppings away? The answer returns to Noonan's point about the brand's need to carry the sustainability banner on its own back.

The program owes some measure of its success, arguably a good deal of it, from the fact it offers an incentive to guests for doing something that's not necessarily convenient.

But that's not a negative spin, Noonan explains. Rather, it's something she hopes more restaurants adopt. The pay-off is worth the price tag.

## CLIMATE ON THE MENU

The company's September 2020 call to introduce a seven-item "Climatarian Menu" that allowed customers to calculate greenhouse gas emissions with build-your-own salads, offers a blueprint. Come October, Panera Bread started doing something similar, although there were visible differences, like the unit of

measurement Just Salad was using, kg CO<sub>2</sub>e. When guests ordered an item online at Just Salad, they saw the estimated carbon footprint compared to that of a quarter-pound beef patty, for context.

On the incentive note, the day Just Salad's "Eat for the Earth" campaign launched, it changed the price of its Climatarian Menu items to reflect their individual carbon footprints. So a salad with a carbon footprint of 0.41 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e cost \$4.10.

This year, any salad or warm bowl was \$8.99 for customers



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# SMARTCHAIN

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using reusable bowls. Online or via the app, if they filtered by Climatorian, guests found a selection of low carbon-emitting salads at that price point. Again, nudging consumers at a cost Just Salad is more than willing to write a check for.

Rewarding guests for eating on the low end of the carbon footprint scale almost surely will pop up again for Just Salad, Noonan says.

Logistically, Just Salad's Climatorian dietary filter sits alongside vegan, keto, gluten-free, and paleo offerings, giving customers a shortcut to identifying the brand's lowest-impact options. Fast Company named it one of 2021's "World Changing Ideas."

More recently, Just Salad's carbon labels achieved compliance with international greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions protocols ISO 14040/14044 and the British PAS 2050 standards.

The brand's partner, Planet FWD, calculates the carbon impact of the individual components of each salad, including but not limited to, individual ingredients and packaging materials, which is where the final emissions value comes from. Just Salad calculates miles traveled by each ingredient based on their origin.

Noonan describes the overall arc as "cradle to grave," meaning it starts from extraction of raw materials and ends at the end-of-life for all the inputs required to create a single unit of product.

Noonan recalls having these conversations with Kenner in November 2019, just a few months into her role. Just Salad had cleared some early, pillar ideas, like composting, and were swapping thoughts on how to further talks about the relationship between food and environmental sustainability.

"During that conversation, we were like yeah, there's been a lot of talk about eating locally. It's wonderful. Should we be talking about that more?" Noonan says. "And I looked at the data and I was like, huh, it says that approximately 10 percent of a food's carbon footprint is related to the miles it travels."

The bulb flashed: Eating local wasn't the end-all to achieving a low carbon footprint. And perhaps the nutrition label in general was a bit outdated. "Maybe now we need something that takes planetary health into account, too," Noonan says.

Broadly, she hopes Just Salad is putting a dent in public awareness that consumers, as eaters, affect climate change. Noonan speaks with other quick-serves and CEOs about reusables, she says, and partners where the brand can. She adds there's plenty of willingness industry-wide to get on board, but reusables "are a tough nut to crack for a lot of operations."

It requires training, procedures, and it can't flip on overnight.



#### REFORESTATION:

Just Salad funded the planting of 12,000-plus trees through Mastercard's Priceless Planet Coalition.



#### ENERGY:

The company reduced average annual energy use by 7 percent, achieving reductions as high as 20 percent in some months, through a four-store pilot program with Budderfly.



#### REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE:

Just Salad raised \$15,000 to support regenerative agriculture projects through Zero Foodprint.



#### ANIMAL WELFARE:

The fast casual met its goal of sourcing 100 percent of eggs from hens raised cage-free.



"On reusables, it's a matter of operators' ability and willingness to participate," Noonan says. "It's a matter of policy. And it's a matter of shifting public opinion. When those three reach a critical level, we will hit a tipping point."

One way to get there could be through one of the industry's fastest-growing avenues—rewards. Relevant pre-virus but ignited by a landscape of mass digital adoption, restaurants are using loyalty and digital channels to accelerate data gathering and brand experience. Can these turn into sustainability outlets?

"That's what we're getting toward," Noonan says. "Rewarding a customer for reusable bowl usage in our app is something we want to do, and we plan to. So I think that the industry has to get creative about integrating sustainability."

And beyond the output and tangible efforts, Just Salad's structure is one other chains can take heed of. The fast casual's marketing and brand departments not only report to Kenner, they report to sustainability as well. It's not a matter of sustainability reporting to marketing, which is more common, but rather vice versa. "That sets the tone for the organization," Noonan says.

The result is every marketing initiative gets scrutinized through the lens of sustainability. This runs up and down the ladder. Every time a new employee joins the company, HR sends an email introducing

them and asks for a sustainability tip to share for their welcome.

Noonan believes greenhouse gas footprints, at the corporate level, is where the next topic is going. With the SEC proposing a new regulation that publicly traded companies vastly expand their climate disclosure, quantifying scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions is becoming table-stakes. Just Salad last year, for the first time, completed a greenhouse gas emissions inventory, conducted by the consultancy Green Places, across the entirety of its operations. The company also invested in store waste audits showing significant progress toward diverting more than 90 percent of daily waste from landfills, and started selling surplus food via Too Good to Go to achieve quantifiable reductions in waste-related emissions.

"I think that a number of emerging companies will make it easier for small- to medium-sized restaurants to understand their carbon footprint and use data to surgically attack the areas that are most responsible for their environmental footprint," Noonan says. "And that is generally your supply chain."

"So we cannot lose sight of the big picture," she adds. ☑

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