



Recycling at Keurig Green Mountain: A Brewing Problem

“Our goal is not only to ensure that K-cup pods are recyclable — but also recycled.”¹

— Monique Oxender

Monique Oxenderⁱ had been working at Keurig Green Mountain for three years. In that time, she had risen to the rank of chief sustainability officer and assumed many challenges. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, as it was formerly known, had faced significant criticism from the public over its subsidiary Keurig, Inc., and the non-recyclable K-Cup pods used in its brewing machines. The recycling industry presented many challenges outside the company’s purview, yet the acquisition of Keurig by Green Mountain in 2006 had proven to be so enormously successful that it seemed to invite additional scrutiny from environmentalists. Incendiary articles had been published in *The Atlantic*² and *The Washington Post*.³ Dissenters had even released a Cloverfield-style video in which monsters made of K-Cup pods descended upon a helpless city as part of a “Kill the K-Cup” online campaign.⁴

As part of the company’s fiscal 2013 sustainability report (published in early 2014), Oxender and Keurig Green Mountain introduced seven new targets, including a commitment to convert to 100% recyclable K-Cup pods by 2020.⁵ It was Oxender’s responsibility to ensure the company delivered on its promise. This was certainly a tall order, considering the company aspired to have “a Keurig brewer on every counter.”⁶ Keurig Green Mountain needed to address the waste resulting from the brewing system’s K-Cup pods or risk considerable damage to the company’s overall brand and reputation. The impact of all other positive sustainability initiatives would potentially fall on deaf ears. Would Keurig Green Mountain be able to meet its 2020 targets and stay competitive, and would that be enough to quell critics? How could its K-Cup pod be redesigned without sacrificing the quality and convenience its growing consumer base expected? What role did the recycling industry and other manufacturers need to play in order to facilitate a recycling solution? Some had roasted Keurig Green Mountain for not developing fully compostable pods. Others suggested that Keurig scale its existing My K-Cup reusable filter. As Oxender sipped her favorite Green Mountain Coffee single-origin Sumatran brew, she considered how best to tackle the obstacles that inevitably lay ahead.

i University of Michigan, Erb Institute class of 2004

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