



GVV Case Study: Creating Sustainable Products, Part A

Earlier in his career, James was assigned to a project that involved changing the packaging materials used for toothpaste in one of the largest foreign markets of a multinational consumer goods company. In this country, toothpaste came in small tubes packaged in a plastic sachet. Both the plastic sachets and the tubes were non-recyclable, creating much unnecessary waste. The country's government later mandated sustainable alternatives to the standard toothpaste packaging, but oral care companies fought back. They knew making changes to the machinery used to manufacture the products would cost a considerable amount of money, and switching to sustainable materials would impact their revenue. Oral care companies James's employer also wanted to avoid increasing the low consumer price of their toothpaste products, as they were competing with other manufacturers in the local market.

As part of his work on the project, James calculated the cost of producing toothpaste tubes with the new, sustainable packaging, but there was no way to make the same product with sustainable materials and keep the cost of the product low for consumers. As companies began lobbying the government, expressing their inability to create sustainable packaging while still making a profit on the products, James tried to convince others at his workplace to get on board with the sustainable packaging. The materials would be more expensive, and many changes would need to be made to the machinery, but James believed it was the right thing to do, for both the consumers and the environment. When he spoke to his company, he focused his argument on the future investment of making the switch to sustainable products now—no one knew if the lobbying efforts would fail, and they could use their sustainable products to their advantage in the market. Additionally, they could use their influence as one of the largest personal care providers in the country. James also pushed for switching to larger tubes of toothpaste, which would help cut down on waste, as individuals tended to buy multiple smaller tubes, each with their own wasteful packaging. However, the company was uninterested in making sustainable packaging work at that time.

He became frustrated at his employer's lack of care around sustainability, and he knew his work was not fully in line with his values—he wanted to help create products and brands that both gave value to customers and had less of a negative impact on the environment. Knowing James's position and his values, what could he do in this situation?

This material has been adapted for the Online Ethics Center from the Giving Voice to Values content created by Dr. Mary Gentile.