

Chain Has the Right Idea But Wrong Bag

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A rare move to introduce European-style "green retailing" by a Moscow supermarket ran into trouble Wednesday after environmentalists criticized claims of "environmentally friendly" carrier bags.

Luxury supermarket chain Azbuka Vkusa announced the switch to biodegradable carrier bags as part of a move to position itself as a "green" business on Tuesday.

The strategy could make Azbuka Vkusa — renowned among Muscovites for charging impossibly inflated prices for airfreighted Israeli strawberries and expat luxuries like cheddar cheese — an unlikely flagship for European-style green retail in Russia.

A spokesman characterized it as the first move in a wide-ranging environmental social responsibility program that will include cutting back on plastic packaging, increasing energy efficiency and using only recycled paper.

But the move has drawn a mixed reaction from environmentalists — who praised

the sentiment, but criticized the bags.

"These are not 'biodegradable' bags — they are ordinary polyethylene with an additive to weaken the bonds between polymers," said Alexei Kiselyov, director of Greenpeace Russia's anti-toxins campaign, which has recently launched a project to rank supermarkets on their waste output. "Azbuka Vkusa would be better off spending their money on paper bags," he added.

The company says customers of its 43 stores go through 18 million carrier bags a year, posing a "serious threat to the environment." The new bags, which an Azbuka spokesman said are already in shops, are produced by a factory in the Leningrad region at a cost about 15 percent to 20 percent more than ordinary carrier bags.

The new bags are controversial because they use d2w, a compound developed by British company Symphony Environmental Technologies that in the presence of oxygen weakens the carbon bonds between polymers, speeding up the breakdown of plastics.

In a March 2010 report, the British government's Department for the Environment said d2w could not be called biodegradable because although polymers do break down, they do not return to organic matter. It also questioned the health implications of the use of heavy metals in the technology. Symphony rejected the findings at the time.

Genuinely biodegradable plastic bags do exist and are available in Russia, Kiselyov said, but there are only two plants — both in St. Petersburg — that compost them down into organic matter.

"Without those facilities both they and paper bags just go to landfills or incinerators like ordinary rubbish — which misses the whole point," he said by phone.

The only real answer to the waste problem, he said, was to promote the use of multi-use bags, of any material, that would be used "20, 30 or 40 times."

The Azbuka Vkusa spokesman said brown paper bags will be introduced "in a matter of months," along with a cutback on plastic packaging and polyethylene trays.

But he said the supermarket's habit of instructing staff to bag food and nonfood items separately — a practice that can see customers carrying a separate bag for each overpriced luxury they purchase — would continue for health and safety reasons.

Despite reservations about the bags, Kiselyov welcomed the general strategy.

"I support any company director who decides to make environmental responsibility part of his PR, because it's a chance to start a conversation," Kiselyov said. "There isn't a single supermarket chain in Russia really doing that today. So if Azbuka Vkusa starts it, maybe others will follow."

Azbuka, which operates only in Moscow and the Moscow region, does not appear in Greenpeace's ranking of Russia's largest supermarket chains.

In a rating of seven supermarket chains based on the findings of volunteer "secret

customers," Lenta came first largely thanks to glass-recycling points at its stores.

The group placed Auchan last, citing its staff's "aggressive attitude to customers bringing their own bags" and an "obsession" with packaging.

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