



My story...

## Melissa Miners

Senior global affairs manager, sustainable packaging  
at Unilever

An Olympian of communications and sustainability, Melissa is motivated by an intrinsic drive to protect and nurture the environment, while breaking-down barriers of public perception.

Melissa is senior global external affairs manager for sustainable packaging at Unilever, the home of more than 400 consumer brands distributed throughout 190 countries. Unilever prioritises the sustainability of its business growth, with reducing its environmental footprint and increasing its positive social impact at the centre of its business model. Melissa's role is to develop ways of reducing packaging waste, through focusing on factors such as producer responsibility and liaising with governments, NGOs and other businesses to improve local recycling infrastructure.

Melissa spent the early years of her career working in media and public relations agencies and it was while working at global PR agency Hill+Knowlton the she became driven to take her work in a more cause-related direction. Melissa took a sabbatical from the agency to focus on environmental issues, during which time she worked in New Zealand with both the Green Party and the Department of Conservation.

When she returned to the UK, Melissa helped to set up Hill+Knowlton's new sustainability consultancy practice, through which she advised clients such as Hewlett Packard, Britvic, Intercontinental Hotels Group, Compass Group and the HSBC/WWF climate partnership on various sustainability matters – ranging from conflict minerals and deforestation to carbon emissions and renewable energy.

After a number of years in that role, Melissa joined the London 2012 Olympic Games as sustainability communications manager. Sustainability was a major priority for London 2012 and, as well as being a communications lead, Melissa was also heavily involved in writing an ISO about sustainability in mass participation events.

“It was a really exciting role and one which I'm very proud of, due to the sheer scale of what we were doing and the really high profile issues we were managing. I was talking to the top journalists from around the world every single day and it was an unbelievably fast-paced, exciting experience.”

Melissa's London 2012 role also involved working with Olympic sustainability ambassadors, including Jonathon Porritt, Kevin McCloud and Deborah Meaden, to produce promotional content about renewable energy and the Olympic Games.

After London 2012 Melissa moved to Unilever, initially working on supply chain communications in agriculture, the sustainable sourcing of raw materials and manufacturing factors such as renewable energy use, zero waste to landfill and factory emissions. Her next role entailed leading the advocacy work for deforestation under the climate and energy team, and working very closely with Unilever's chief sustainability officer Jeff Seabright, which Melissa found extremely inspiring: "Jeff is very inspirational because of his history of working in climate issues. He's also got the most incredible brain to deal with many different very complex issues at a fast pace."

Melissa now focuses on the 12 priority markets in which Unilever lobbies for various sustainability matters, such as extensive producer responsibility around the issues with packaging waste.

"Our target is that all of our packaging will be recyclable by 2025 but a lot of this falls out of our direct control. We might be able to make recyclable materials but if there isn't the local infrastructure in place to be able to recycle them then it's pretty much useless. So we are working with governments, NGOs and other businesses to transform the local infrastructure to be able to deal with recyclable products."

This often means very different things in in different markets and Melissa describes her role as an issues-tackling one where she works with external consultants to help advise people on the ground. This relates not only to how Unilever can develop the systemic and transformational change to be able to deliver their own packaging equipment but also to influencing the wider industry, so that there is the necessary local infrastructure in place. These sustainable packaging goals apply across the whole Unilever group but, as Melissa explains, there are some particularly problematic issues: "With products that have flexible or multi-layer packaging, such as home care goods like liqui-tabs, the problems include safety and quality issues as well as the lack of suitable recycling capability."

When asked specifically about her career experiences as a woman in the sustainability sector, Melissa says: "it's definitely a male dominated industry, and there have been some challenges along the way in terms of finding a voice to make myself heard" but, overall, she describes her experiences in a very positive light. In terms of advice for other people looking to join – or progress within – the sustainability industry, Melissa's advice is to find a specialism.

"Sustainability in business is a very broad term so focus on something that you're particularly interested in, such as agricultural sourcing, renewable energy or deforestation. Find your niche that could be valuable to other people. Sustainability in business is still a fairly new area, and we need people to be able to go into the depths of the details, so the more you can focus on a specialism the better."

With it being such a new area, Melissa feels that the current public perception of business sustainability is an issue in her role: "I often feel like I have to defend Unilever's actions and to change the public perception of what businesses are doing about sustainability." She feels the way to do that is to have a clear narrative for her role, how it influences wider change, and to focus on why the business is prioritising sustainability. "Businesses aren't just doing this because they think it's going to sell more products," she explains, "they're doing it because they have the opportunity and the scale to be able to influence real change, as well as being able to fundamentally see how it can affect their bottom line and their profit."

Melissa is still motivated by the same passion for the environment which prompted her to refocus her work during her earlier career, describing how she always likes to: "try and bring it back to the bigger problem which we're trying to solve".