

Sustainability Case Study: Numi Organic Tea



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Introduction

As sustainability has entered into the consciousness of society, it has become evident that our current methods of production and the materials we use are destructive to our planet. Production is not only polluting the environment but putting ourselves in harm's way with the constant exposure to the key ingredients of toxic chemicals in the products that we use every single day. This is most visible in our use of single-use plastic packaging and the immense waste that is generated on a daily basis through production and consumption. The EPA estimates that in 2018 alone, containers and packaging made up 28.1% of total waste in the United States, resulting in 82.2 million tons of waste.¹

Customer preferences are changing to reflect this concern. There is now a demand for products that are produced with minimal resources, natural and organic materials, and that allow consumers to purchase in line with their values, especially the value of sustainability. To align with customer desires, businesses are rethinking their supply chains, identifying carbon-intensive practices, and minimizing resource consumption. Many companies are even reevaluating their core values and brand image to make these large-scale changes. However, other companies have arisen with the mission and sustainability mindset from the onset to fill the gap in demand while more established companies struggle to decarbonize. Sustainable missions and practices provide a unique value that allows these companies to succeed with their customers and with the greater market. Companies such as Banza, Alter Eco, Justin's, Numi Organic Tea—on which this case study is conducted—and many others have become leaders in the food and beverage industry, pioneering sustainable solutions for supply chains, packaging, and partnerships.

158 million Americans drink tea as their beverage of choice daily.² Globally, this totaled 6.3 billion kilograms consumed in 2020 alone, with consumption only expected to increase.³ This represents a significant market as well as a considerable emission-producing industry. Due to this opportunity to decarbonize and create more sustainable solutions, trends within the tea market are leaning towards fair trade and organic products. Numi Organic Tea has played a part in this trend and created a successful impact-based company, ripe with lessons learned in sustainable management.

Background

Numi Organic Tea is a private company that was started in Oakland, California in 1999 by two siblings who desired to share the benefits of tea while supporting human rights initiatives. Ahmed Rahim and Reem Hassani combined their knowledge of tea and artistic skills to form the brand based on fond memories of the loomi lime tea of their childhood in Iraq.⁴ Core for the foundation of the brand was sustainability. From the beginning, the siblings created their products to be organic with no toxic chemicals, made with little to no wasteful packaging, and with a focus on ethical and sustainable sourcing.

The brand sells tea products and other beverages that are Fair Trade certified as well as organic and health-conscious. Several of the core ingredients, such as pu-erh and honeybush, were first introduced by Numi Organic Tea into the US market.⁵ Recently, Numi Organic Tea has expanded to pre-made and bottled beverages as well as non-tea beverages such as drinking chocolates and

wellness shots. The products also use compostable wrappers and are climate neutral.⁶ Through the sales of these products, Numi Organic Tea accrues an annual revenue of \$5 million.⁷ Today, Numi Organic Tea is classified as a medium social enterprise with headquarters still located in Oakland. In total, Numi Organic Tea employs a staff of 30.⁸

A critical element of Numi Organic Tea is its paired nonprofit and its social impact. The stated vision statement embodies this core element where, “Our vision is to activate a chain of positivity that radiates far and wide. Through our products and practices, we create lasting positive change.”⁹ In 2019, the company created the Numi Foundation, which is its charitable arm. Through the Foundation, the company spearheads initiatives, coordinates employees for paid volunteering, and donates to various organizations. Numi Organic Tea itself leads Together for H2OPE, a program providing farming communities with clean drinking water, and Numi Curriculum, which brings gardening education to California elementary schools. Reem Hassani herself helps create the curriculum for the gardening and arts initiative. The company also partners with the Iraq Foundation to support students through a summer school program in Baghdad, Iraq.¹⁰ Most recently, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Numi Organic Tea began a campaign to alleviate food insecurity. Their work includes partnerships with local food growers and stores to deliver organic produce to low-income seniors, BIPOC communities, and those facing obstacles to obtaining food stamps and stimulus funding.¹¹ Through these programs, Numi Organic Tea has impacted 14,370 individuals as of 2020.¹²

Definition of Sustainability at Numi Organic Tea

Numi Organic Tea does not follow an explicit definition of sustainability, but co-founder Reem Hassani provides that “Sustainability is not an absolute, it’s a process.”¹³ This holds true as the company holds itself to many tenets of sustainability throughout its entire brand originating from their mission statement of “Activating Purpose.” The standard elements of sustainability for Numi Organic Tea include climate neutrality, offsetting carbon emissions, and water and energy conservation. This is supplemented by secondary and emerging elements such as plant-based and compostable materials, non-GMO and organic products, and traceable ingredients.



Figure 1
Numi Organic Tea Certifications

Beyond environmental factors, Numi Organic Tea strives to meet social, reporting, and safety standards associated with sustainability. Sustainability under Numi Organic Tea’s definition is founded on social impact, following USDA organic specifications to prevent worker exposure to chemicals, Fair Trade standards, and Fair Labor practices. Beyond USDA organic certified, Numi Organic Tea is a Certified B Corporation, Climate Neutral Certified, Fair Trade Certified, and Verified Fair Labor accredited (See Figure 1).¹⁴ This social definition of sustainability is

further supplemented by its various charitable initiatives through the foundation, such as Together for H2OPE. Disclosing and reporting carbon emissions and other metrics is important to the Numi Organic Tea brand, with transparency evident on their website and other materials. Upon in-depth analysis of their website, Numi Organic Tea does not advertise any of their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for their employees and in their hiring practices. This is one area that could be substantially improved upon in their definition of sustainability.

Numi Organic Tea defines sustainability at the corporate level and internally but also requires its supply chain and partners to abide by these same tenets. As Numi Organic Tea holds itself to Fair Trade and Fair Labor standards, partners must also comply. All growers are required to refrain from chemical usage following organic specifications and offer fair wages and safe working conditions, unlike many other tea brands.¹⁵ Numi Organic Tea translates this sustainability definition to its customers and stakeholders by ensuring transparency. Information on ingredients, emissions, and packaging is clearly stated on their website. Additionally, the carbon footprint of their products is labeled on the packaging, allowing consumers to readily understand and assess their climate impact (See Figure 2).



Figure 2
Carbon Footprint Label

The carbon footprint was created from greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions analysis in partnership with Planet FWD. Under the assumption that a serving of tea was 2.26 grams of tea leaves with 8 ounces of water, the footprint was calculated per tea bag. The footprint is measured in kilograms of CO₂e and is calculated to be 0.038 per tea bag.¹⁶ The emissions sources break down into the following percentages: 23% created from the production of ingredients, 18% from packaging, 13% from product transport, and 46% from the energy needed to boil water in the consumption of the products (See Figure 2).¹⁷ These scope 1 through 3 emissions total 2,844 tCO₂e per year, according to Climate Neutral.¹⁸ According to Numi Organic Tea, factors considered in the ingredient emissions include, “raw materials, local transport and processing, milling, and blending.”¹⁹ Most quantitative data is available for this calculation due to Numi Organic Tea’s transparent sourcing; in the case that it is not available, an average created from product weights is used. On the packaging side, the emissions calculation includes their boxes, corrugated cardboard cases, and plant-based and compostable tea wrappers.²⁰ The transport calculation used a holistic analysis with overhead energy consumption, downstream transportation, and total distribution activities in addition to the direct transportation activities of scope 1 emissions. While these three factors are internal, Numi Organic Tea turned towards consumer activities and

experience to determine the emissions created from product consumption. Averaging the main tea brewing methods and energy sources—stovetop, microwave, and electric kettle—the company arrived at an emissions calculation that composed the greatest emissions source for the company.²¹ Upon analysis of their GHG emissions, Numi Organic Tea paired educational marketing with the carbon footprint label to make customers aware of the alternatives and best practices to pursue when consuming the product. This includes directions for using an electric kettle and ensuring that customer energy is renewable and clean. Additionally, the product provides a comparison with coffee to affirm customer choices in selecting their tea products over other beverages. While a cup of Numi Organic Tea produces 0.038 CO₂e, a cup of coffee can produce anywhere from 0.28 to 0.55 CO₂e per espresso or latte.²²

Numi Organic Tea is committing to becoming carbon neutral, which is a critical metric for how they define sustainability. The company has made commitments to a 50% reduction of 2021 equivalent emissions by the year 2030.²³ As this is in line with the Paris Climate Agreement to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the company is Certified Climate Neutral. While the company has not met this goal as of 2022, they participate in the program to measure and reduce total emissions while also purchasing offsets.

Leadership

Numi Organic Tea's sustainability management is led by its two founders, Ahmed Rahim and Reem Hassani. Currently, Ahmed Rahim holds the position of Chief Visionary Officer (CVO) and chairs the Numi Foundation board.²⁴ Through his position, Ahmed is in charge of sourcing ingredients and discovering new partners. He is active in assisting small sustainable startups and entrepreneurs in the space as well.²⁵ Reem Hassani holds the title of Chief Brand Officer (CBO) and is the co-creator of the Numi Foundation.²⁶ Reem is responsible for the company's marketing—particularly the packaging, as she is an artist by trade. Both of the founders are engaged in several external sustainability initiatives and collaborations, as well as take part in speaking engagements and blog posts to demonstrate support for sustainability on behalf of the brand.

Their passion for sustainability is evident in their leadership style and their commitment to their relationships. The co-founders sought to hire those that are like-minded and partner with farmers and communities that share similar values, such as fair labor practices.²⁷ This also includes other leaders in the sustainability space and government officials. Advocacy is new to the brand, but the co-founders have entered into cooperation with the Climate Collaborative as well as engaged with policymakers directly.²⁸ On top of this advocacy, the co-founders themselves feel inclined to educate their customers and others about sustainable solutions. Through both social media and their product marketing, the co-founders seek to present climate and sustainability awareness to the consumer.

Jane Franch is Numi Organic Tea's Vice President (VP) of Strategic Sourcing and Sustainability as of May 2022.²⁹ It is unclear from the research for this case study where the VP position sits within the company's organizational structure and its relationship with the other company executives. Internally, she handles the development of the supply chain, leads the sustainability strategy for the company, and advises on climate action. Specifically, Jane seeks to streamline

and make more sustainable packaging, manufacturing, product innovation, and regenerative material sourcing.³⁰ Externally, she is responsible for contacting and connecting with suppliers and partners as well as identifying new opportunities for sustainable impact. Jane is also involved in engagement with the wider public and has taken interviews to discuss Numi Organic Tea's sustainability initiatives in greater depth. After a review of these articles and interviews, it is assumed that Jane's role is positively perceived, and her work is innovative and industry-leading.³¹

Relations with Suppliers and Partners

Central to Numi Organic Tea's sustainability strategy are its partners. The organization incorporates suppliers and partners into its sustainability goals and requires them to meet and exceed the same standards. Applying a hands-on approach to their partnership relations allows for mutual trust and shared work towards their sustainability goals. Numi Organic Tea sources 130 plus organic ingredients from numerous partners in over 34 countries.³² 80% of these ingredients are Fair Trade Certified.³³ This represents a significant network of partners and an extensive supply chain to ensure sustainability throughout. Transparency among all these stakeholders and partners is essential. Numi Organic Tea claims that 85% of its ingredients can be traced to the farm level, representing the open lines of communication with their farmers.³⁴ Without transparency, sustainability goals and requirements are difficult to enforce and advance throughout the supply chain.

Sustainability goals are fostered through the supply chain due to the commitments of the suppliers to participate in ethical sourcing and labor standards. Fair Trade and labor are critical for the partners of Numi Organic Tea. Farmers and suppliers who participate in the Fair Trade accrue Fair Trade premiums, of which Numi Organic Tea has paid over \$126,765 and donated \$15,000.³⁵ The farmers can then determine how these funds can be implemented in their communities. This can look like infrastructure, medical, educational, and technological programming.³⁶ Verified Labor goals are achieved through direct partnerships, fair wages, and safe working conditions throughout the supply chain. For those partners that are unable to meet these goals initially, Numi Organic Tea works with them to implement best practices and transition towards higher sustainability models.

Numi Organic Tea also engages with external groups that seek to unite industry leaders to progress toward shared goals. The Climate Collaborative is a lobbying group in the food and beverage industry that advocates for climate-friendly practices and initiatives with elected officials. The firm also participates in the One Step Closer (OSC2) Packaging Collaborative, which deliberates on alternatives to plastic packaging as well as the actions that the industry can take to mitigate climate change.³⁷

While shared goals and values are necessary for their partners, Numi Organic Tea also mandates that partners hold sustainability certifications. In the United States, farmers must be USDA organic compliant, and all other partners must possess an organic certification. On the labor side, Fair Trade Certification and Fair Labor Verification are pertinent. Both of these certifications are accredited by a third party, with the latter verification audited annually to ensure compliance.³⁸ Numi Organic Tea does not specify whether its partners must be Climate Neutral Certified, but

since the corporation as a whole is certified, it is valid to assume their partners and supply chains are held to the same standard.

The Future of Sustainability at Numi Organic Tea

In 2020, Numi Organic Tea released its Climate Action Plan. The Climate Action Plan focuses on five key steps. The first activity is to measure and label all emissions and climate impacts of their products. This transparency begins with the Carbon Footprint Label and includes data on the impact that is publicly available.³⁹ Once measurement and labeling are conducted, Numi Organic Tea is committing to reducing emissions as key activity two. This can be exhibited in their work with Climate Neutral and their investments in offsetting.⁴⁰ The third key activity is to offset in a responsible manner, leading to offsetting purchases that benefit local communities and conservation. Key activity four centers on their manufacturing with the goal of using plant-based packaging. This step has already been successfully implemented through the creation of compostable and plant-based tea wrappers that are free from plastic, toxins, and GMOs.⁴¹ Using plant-based materials and soy inks allows the boxes to be recycled and the tea bags to be home-composted.⁴² The last key activity that Numi Organic Tea promises to engage in is advocacy for change. This comprises environmental justice and climate action and the lobbying for these issues aligned with their values. According to the Plan, Numi Organic Tea has already made progress on these goals by engaging with the Climate Collaborative and supporting “the Advanced Clean Trucking Rule, California SB 525 (offshore wind), the Build Back Better Act, and other proposals to accelerate the shift to a post-fossil fuel economy.”⁴³

The delivery and execution of the Climate Action Plan would improve their sustainability performance. No timeline has been set to fulfill the requirements set out in the Plan, but the reduction of scope 1 through 3 emissions is already underway. The company enlisted Planet FWD to generate life cycle analyses from collected company emissions data. That data was combined with a water calculation and a grid mix to form an equation that was later utilized in the introduction of carbon footprint branding.⁴⁴ In the interim, Numi Organic Tea offsets emissions with CarbonFund and Envira Amazonia. Through these offset programs, the company has contributed to 500,000 acres of rainforest protected with \$35,433 in credit investments reported.⁴⁵ In 2019 alone, 2,243 metric tons of CO₂ were offset by these efforts.⁴⁶ The offsets are mainly purchased through reforestation programs but also towards hydropower.⁴⁷ This complete GHG emissions analysis was recently conducted for the release of the Carbon Footprint Label earlier this year. The Carbon Footprint Label is a crucial product of this emissions analysis. The other central initiatives of the Plan, such as plant-based packaging and advocacy for large-scale change, are also underway. Numi Organic Tea has incorporated compostable tea wrappers and packaging as well as joined several lobbying organizations and working groups.

In addition to the Plan, Numi Organic Tea can also expand on its annual Impact Report (See Figure 3). The impact report could be developed into a comprehensive sustainability report beyond just the highlights. This report would also explicitly identify key performance indicators (KPIs) and establish quantitative goals for the future. Given their significant progress towards climate neutrality, net zero is probable. However, a large percentage of Numi Organic Tea’s emissions, 46%, is generated by the heating of the water by consumers.⁴⁸ This presents a fundamental challenge to emissions targets as consumers are responsible for the largest

percentage of emissions that is out of the firm's hands. The strategy Numi Organic Tea has decided to employ is educating consumers on their energy choices through their carbon footprint labels. These labels include information on how to brew the tea sustainably and which allows the consumer to evaluate and potentially reconsider their choices. This transition to net zero is the way forward for Numi Organic Tea.

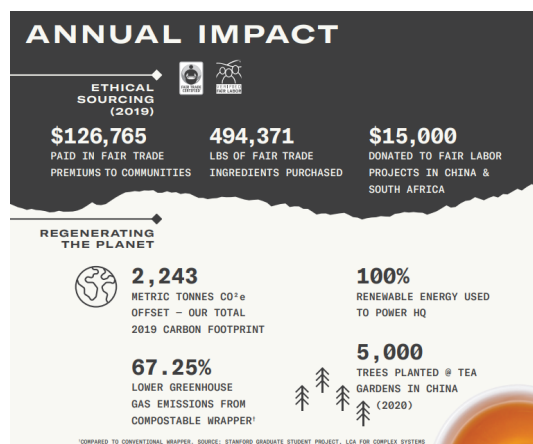


Figure 3

Excerpt from 2019-2020 Annual Impact Report

Conclusion

Numi Organic Tea is one of the leaders in sustainability management in the food and beverage industry. From the company's conception, it was committed to sustainability. Since then, the adoption of its new company vision of "Activating Purpose," Carbon Footprint Label, and Climate Action Plan have propelled it into a leadership position with high sustainable brand recognition. While there is still much work to be done to achieve the goals that it has set for itself, Numi Organic Tea has created a comprehensive and integrated definition of sustainability, management structure, and social impact strategy.

Other companies can take Numi Organic Tea as an example. Three of Numi Organic Tea's key business strategies are especially notable for adoption by other firms. Numi Organic Tea has developed a comprehensive overhaul of its packaging while many others struggle to innovate. As plastic is the material of choice for much of packaging, it is difficult for companies to break from the norm and change to more sustainable options. By imitating and applying Numi Organic Tea's commitment to innovating sustainable packaging, other companies can transition to compostable and plant-based packaging. Numi Organic Tea is also committed to reductions in carbon emissions throughout the supply chain, meanwhile, the industry as a whole has struggled to reduce scope 2 and 3 emissions. However, Numi Organic Tea has made significant progress in these reductions that can be considered a paradigm for others. Their headquarters is powered by 100% renewable energy and require their partners and suppliers to do the same throughout their supply chain.⁴⁹ Also commendable is their commitment to offsets investments in the interim while they identify more avenues and methods for carbon emission reduction. This is a key step that other firms and organizations can assume as they develop stronger and more comprehensive decarbonization strategies. Finally, Numi Organic Tea is devoted to transparency. Through

Climate Neutral, they publish their emissions levels and advertise additional impact metrics on their website. Their approach has resulted in the innovative and industry-leading Carbon Footprint Label. This transparency between the company and its customers drives all parties and stakeholders towards increased awareness and continual sustainable improvement. Numi Organic Tea strives and attains consequential sustainability management that serves as a precedent for others in the food and beverage industry.

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