

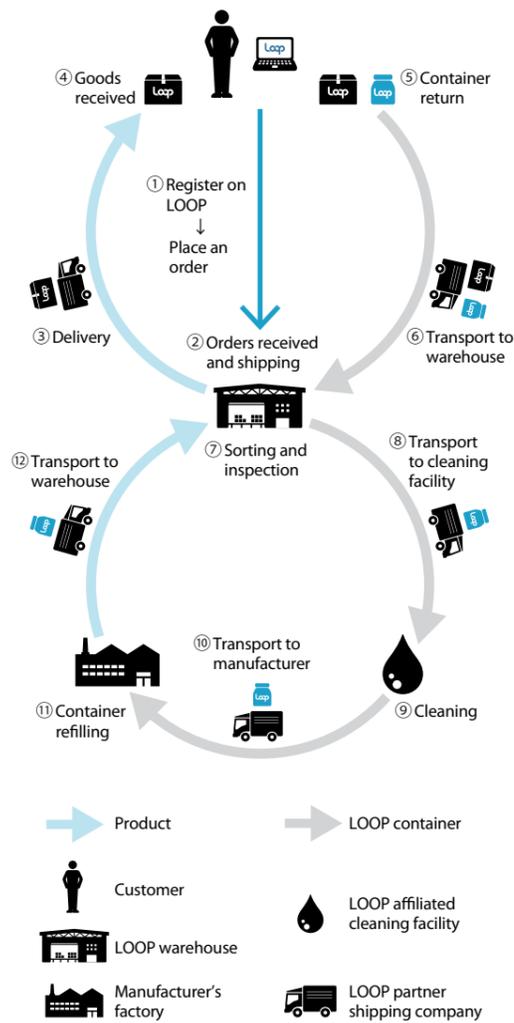
The Infinite Loop

Loop aims to tackle waste through a circular model, involving both company and consumer.

by Kirsty Bouwers

The fight against the global climate crisis is upon us: to get to a net zero carbon world, humans need to drastically rethink our usage of finite resources. In Japan, endeavors to do so are coming from the industrial sector, supported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), with the aim being to create a circular economy based on the 3R (reuse, reduce, recycle) principle. Indeed, reusing is the new vogue, with companies that manage to reuse bottles and containers fitting perfectly within this goal.

To support these efforts, the TMG has selected several companies that are creating a new business model for the sustainable use of plastic. These include major multinational Kao, the chemical and cosmetics producer, who was selected for their aim to reduce single-use plastics. Another initiative selected is Loop, by TerraCycle, a social enterprise which helps companies not just recycle, but reuse their packaging. Loop announced their entry into the Japanese market in 2019.



The Loop concept is quite simple: a customer buys a branded product in a Loop-approved durable container from the on-line store or physical shop, and once finished, Loop will pick up the empty container or the customer may return it to a collection bin at a designated retail store. Loop will collect the packaging and send them to a commissioned cleaning facility. Cleaned packages are returned to the manufacturer, where the packaging is refilled and sent to the Loop warehouse again, after which it reaches the customer. In essence, it creates an infinite loop of reusable, zero-waste packaging between company and customer, and is an example of a circular economy.

The concept that Loop is promoting is not far from *mottainai*, a Japanese phrase which refers to lamenting the waste of things. The traditional spirit of *mottainai* is undergoing a revival due to the renewed focus on sustainability and the plastic-free movement. An example is the charge on plastic carrier bags introduced in Japan to help reduce the amount



Products from a wide range of industries are included in the Loop trial, such as these containers of soup stock granules.

of plastic consumption. Loop ties in perfectly with this sentiment, and presents a new way for Tokyoites to embark on a zero-waste lifestyle.

Loop is currently planning operations or is starting trials in seven countries, including the US, the UK, and France. In Japan, a trial with 22 major manufacturers and retailers, including Ajinomoto, Aeon, and Canon (as of September 2020,) is set to start in spring 2021. It is the first in the world to be conducted both online and in-store, with Loop products set to be made available at several Aeon supermarkets within Tokyo and other sites within Japan.

The trial sees the packaging undergoing durability tests, as well as tests to measure the level of environmental impact. Special packaging had to be designed which would be easy to clean and durable enough to reuse, while still being visually appealing. With design being very important to many Japanese consumers, this was something Loop and the participating companies needed to get right.

Eric Kawabata, Asia-Pacific General Manager at Loop, recognizes this and says they are up for the challenge. “Japanese manufacturers are renowned for their relentless drive for improvement and perfection,” he notes. Indeed, some companies have already created luxurious new packaging designs in anticipation.

Ultimately, the aim is to change consumer habits and views on waste, driving them towards a more sustainable lifestyle. To help nudge people in the right direction and better inform them, Loop products and its online platform may include messages on sustainability. Through this, Kawabata notes, customers are slowly educated on the issue of waste, with positive reinforcement via the platform hopefully helping them appreciate and actively choose a zero-waste, sustainable life. With even more companies set to sign up for the Loop trial soon, reducing waste in Tokyo by reusing has never looked as easy as now.



Aesthetics as well as sustainability and strength were taken into account when designing new packaging for these printing ink containers.