

How to Save the World Without Changing Anything

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Climate trends “are not even moving in the right direction” according to the United Nations.¹ What must we do to survive? One path forward is to create innovative sustainable alternatives that can succeed in the market. However, gaining acceptance for sustainable innovations is not a straightforward task. In many cases, asking people to abandon established offerings in favor of sustainable ones implies that they must throw away old and familiar practices, which they may be reluctant to do.

Yet some sustainable innovations have gained rapid acceptance. For example, plant-based meats designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions now account for 1.7% of unit sales in the meat market.² To understand how this feat was accomplished, we interviewed 37 industry experts (focusing on founders and upper management), recorded nearly 400 pages of observations while participating in food industry trade shows; and analyzed over 7000 publicly available documents from industry and news media sources.

Analysis of the data shows that the success of plant-based meat stems from a strategy unlike those typically employed by firms bringing innovations to market. This was not a strategy of masking production differences to make the product feel familiar³, emphasizing differences to avoid existing regulations⁴, or offering a lower-quality product to disrupt the market⁵. Instead, plant-based meat found success through a “displacement” strategy.

What is Displacement?

Displacement is a strategy of gradually working to shift the meaning of an established product so that an innovation can share its label despite introducing new inputs or production technologies. When successful, the innovation becomes accepted as fundamentally the same as the old product. Displacement shows end users that they can save the world without changing anything—they can have their meat and eat it too.

In the case of plant-based meat, the label “meat” was traditionally seen as applicable only to products made from animal sources. However, over more than ten years, meat has become an acceptable label for products made without animals. This was no small feat, since plant-based meat faced vehement opposition from competitors, regulators, and media personalities. Yet this shift in meaning is being accepted by supporters and detractors alike. This is evinced in part by the rapid growth, expansion, and internationalization of startups such as Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat. At the same time, the use of this definition in trade media increased tenfold (and continues to trend upward).

¹ United Nations. (2019). Global Sustainable Development Report 2019. Retrieved from https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf.

² Good Food Institute. (2023). U.S. retail market insights for the plant-based industry. Retrieved from <https://gfi.org/marketresearch>.

³ Hargadon, A. B., & Douglas, Y. (2001). When innovations meet institutions: Edison and the design of the electric light. *Administrative science quarterly*, 46(3), 476-501.

⁴ Garud, R., Kumaraswamy, A., Roberts, A., & Xu, L. (2022). Liminal movement by digital platform-based sharing economy ventures: The case of Uber Technologies. *Strategic Management Journal*, 43(3), 447-475.

⁵ Christensen, C., Raynor, M. E., & McDonald, R. (2013). *Disruptive innovation*. Brighton, MA, USA: Harvard Business Review.

To further investigate how widespread this acceptance has become, we sat down with a director of one of North America's largest meat trade associations and asked, "what do you make of the label 'meat' being used for products made entirely from plants?" Their surprising response was, "What else would you call it?"

How Does Displacement Work?

Data analysis shows that displacement can be broken down into two actionable steps:

1. *Reframe the established product* to justify using its label for an innovation with new sources or production technologies. For example, plant-based firms reframed meat as a sensory experience that could be exactly replicated from plant sources, meaning consumers could continue using the product as usual.
2. *Manage spillovers* as innovation spreads beyond the firm's intended audiences (e.g., investors, commercial customers, end users, etc.) and new stakeholders become involved. For example, the firm Impossible Foods reframed meat to gain support from investors and consumers, but their novel ingredients and production technologies spilled over to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and multiple advocacy groups who became involved in determining whether the product was safe and nutritious.

In addition to the above steps, it is important to note that displacement is an ongoing process in which new challenges continue to emerge and previously resolved challenges resurface as circumstances change. In the case of plant-based meat, the product's widespread availability has led consumers to question its healthfulness more seriously – this is an old issue reemerging in a new way. The data also show that in this ongoing process, some challenges from powerful stakeholders can be escalated into spectacles that draw favorable attention from the media and broader public audiences. Plant-based meat companies, for example, often escalate their struggles into "David and Goliath" narratives that resonate with the general public and generate a substantial amount of support.

In sum, the displacement strategy offers a way forward for advancing sustainability when it is clear that necessary design changes will not be accepted as is. The case of plant-based meat shows that it is possible to let people have it both ways; however, there is ongoing work to be done to establish and maintain the sense that novel products are the same old things that people are used to.

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