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**Retail and Clean Tech team member Sarah Neil reports on the hot topics in food and drink following the recent Food & Drink Trends and Innovations conference.**

It was great to be back at this event following a two year hiatus. There was a general feeling of excitement to be back at an in-person events and a sense of joviality as people broke the ice with jokes about what kind of handshake alternative to use.

Sustainability was the hot topic of the day, with nearly every discussion point throughout the event linking back to it. Affordability and the cost of living crisis took a close second place and was identified as the number one issue affecting consumers right now.

The tension between these two keys trends in the food and beverage sector gave rise to some interesting conversation. Consumer research shows that sustainability is an important topic to consumers and, all other things being equal, promoting clear messages about sustainability on your packaging can be the factor that sets you apart from competitors. At the same time, 1 in 5 consumers would refuse to pay even a small amount more for a sustainable product. As much as consumers idealise sustainability, it still takes a back seat to quality and cost which remain the most important factors to consumers in the purchasing process.

During the pandemic and the associated lockdowns, retailers saw a general trend in favour of more luxury food and drink goods as some consumers tried to create enjoyment and indulgence within the home. Whilst some retailers see this as a trend which is here to stay and continue to invest in their premium ranges, other retailers have shifted their focus to promote their value ranges and it is predicted by some that we will continue to see the growth of value ranges and price matching offers within supermarkets.

Many of the speakers identified the need for sustainability to be considered during every stage of the production, distribution and consumption process. There are a number of issues to consider, including the environmental issues associated with harvesting natural resources, the impact of manufacturing and distribution and the packaging of the products. In addition to all of that, one issue many brands don't consider is how the consumer will handle the product's packaging. Accessibility seems to be the biggest hurdle when it comes to consumer interaction with the sustainability process. It is important that consumers have easy access to mechanisms which give them the power to re-use, recycle and engage in a circular distribution process. Schemes which require consumers to leave the home in order to engage, for example visiting a supermarket to return a used bottle so it can be used again, do not have the desired impact because most consumers forget and other consumers are simply not prepared to make the effort. Most speakers agreed that to have an impact, industries and Governments need to work together to ensure consumers can easily recycle, return or reuse packaging from their homes.

We represent a wide variety of food and beverage brands and we would love to speak to you if you have any IP related queries.