

Abigail Forsyth is a Cup Winner

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WHAT:
KEEPCUP
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A few years ago, working behind the coffee machine at a Melbourne café chain she was running with her brother Jamie, Abigail Forsyth began to notice just how much waste they were producing every day. Constantly breaking down boxes and dealing with all sorts of disposable packaging—including a profusion of disposable coffee cups—led the pair to trial sending their takeaway customers away with their coffees in Tupperware soup mugs. When the customers started returning the mugs to be reused, they knew they had a market for their burgeoning idea of what would eventually become the KeepCup.

Only two years after the inception of the product, as the first barista-standard reusable takeaway cup to hit the market, over a million of the brightly coloured KeepCups have already been sold in Australia, and, more recently, across the globe [Ed.: I saw them in Iceland! Really!]. With enough plastic in twenty-eight disposable cups to make just one KeepCup, coffee-philes must use their KeepCups approximately fifteen times to begin making a difference. Melbourne's latte-loving population has flocked in droves to the sustainable alternative, and Abigail hopes the rest of the world will follow suit.

—You've taken part in a lot of design markets—obviously the design element of the KeepCup was really important to its success.

—Aesthetics were so important to us. The principles of using it were totally grounded in sustainability but the reason that you would use it was never just going to be 'Oh, it's the right thing to do.' It had to be fun, it had to be beautiful, and it had to be something that you would want to carry and feel attached to.

—You do notice that people are really funny about their mug, especially in corporate office environments.

—Yeah! I remember as a child I gave my grandmother a mug for Christmas because she had some chipped old brown stained mug, but she never used the one I gave her. Now I know why she never used it—because she loved the one she had.

—Is the KeepCup completely made in Australia?

—It's made completely in Australia except for the band around it, which is made in China. It's made of silicon, and there are no silicon manufacturers in Australia. We chose to manufacture in Melbourne for sustainability reasons, but the nice thing is that it's evolved into a better product as well. If we've got an issue we just drive out to Lilydale and have a meeting and resolve it, whereas a longer distance would make that difficult.

—I first found out about the KeepCup when an organic health food shop, near my house in Carlton North, had a KeepCup-themed window display. I know you have a lot of corporate support, but how much do the small businesses matter to your success?

—They're critical. KeepCup has really been a ground-up movement, so it's been individuals who've said 'I've been looking for something like this' who've watched the rise of the disposable cup but enjoy having a coffee on the run—the KeepCup's provided them with a great solution. They're the market we want to talk to all the time. When we first started we did a market at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and this girl came up to me and said "I'd love to carry one of those, but I can't because I drink Campos coffee and they're way too cool to use a reusable cup". I nearly got into an argument with her about what was 'cool' and what wasn't, and then the next week Will Young from Campos coffee ordered ten thousand! He said he'd been looking for this product for years. When he said it was 'cool', he gave us such legitimacy. It really helped us.

—Do you think people are becoming increasingly mindful of sustainability issues, or do you think the KeepCup has been influential in that growing mindfulness?

—Both. I think the KeepCups have given people permission to do the right thing. We want people to do it because they want to do it, and not because they feel guilty about it. I think people are looking for ways to do the right thing, and it's just about facilitating that.

—There are some very similar products on the market now, but you were the first. How do you deal with imitators and competitors?

—We were the first. But, I mean, it's a cup. The cup's been around for a long time. People need cups! If someone directly imitates the KeepCup and is essentially passing it off as a KeepCup, we'll take action. But really, what KeepCup is about is getting people to stop using disposable cups, so anyone who makes a product that's going to assist with that—fantastic. We're happy for them to share the market with us because it's huge, 500 billion disposable cups are manufactured every year in the world. Something's got to change, and we don't want to be a lone voice advocating change. We can't take care of all the cups!

—Have you ever had a celebrity endorse the product? Are you that kind of brand?

—I know Keira Knightley's got one! And, um, do you know Peter Andre?

—Do I ever.

—He's done a video where he's got one! He's opening a cafe in London where he's going to stock the KeepCup. I posted the video on Facebook and someone replied 'Are you sure this is the endorsement you want?' [Laughs] It's hilarious.

—How much would you say you live a sustainable life, outside of the KeepCup?

—There are certain things that are important to me in the way I live. We live and work really locally, so my brother and I ride bikes to work. I love my garden and composting. I'm also all about tap water—not drinking bottled water. We're constantly reworking our website too—we're about to do a sustainability page, a bit of a blog about what we're doing as a business to become more sustainable. I think what's important to us is to communicate that sustainability is a journey—it's not an end point you reach.