

## Direct to Landfill – How Direct to Consumer Brands Engender Environmental Waste

There is a systemic desire for convenience throughout humanity that too often overrules our conscience. Despite reports of the wretched working conditions Amazon delivery drivers endure, (just recently, a driver had to [deliver](#) 172 packages amid Hurricane Ian), the convenience of ordering necessities to your door overrides any sense of empathy (Steinbuch). Even in the UK, with food-delivery company Deliveroo being [challenged](#) in the UK supreme court because of opaque termination procedures and rock-bottom pay rates for its delivery drivers (Criddle), Deliveroo reported a [59% increase](#) in orders (Sweney).

When the opportunity of removing a bothersome task from life presents itself, we take it. Shopping for a new mattress is one of these bothersome tasks. To venture out from the comfort of one's home to then engage with a frustratingly present salesman and have hundreds of pounds coaxed from one's wallet is hardly enjoyable. Offering to remove this task from your life, in steps American-based bedding and mattress brand Casper Sleep [Casper].

The company burst onto the market in 2014 with a simple sales pitch: order a mattress of your exact specifications online and have it delivered to your door in mere weeks. The ordeal of going to a physical mattress store became one of the past. Casper catered to the convenience-hungry consumer, and it catapulted their success. In 2019, as US brick-and-mortar mattress giant Mattress Firm filed for [bankruptcy](#), Casper declared a nearly \$1.1 billion valuation (Aliaj et al.).

Central to Casper's successes was a very generous return policy: after ordering a mattress online, if after [100 days](#) it did not meet your expectations, you could return it for a full refund (Higgins-Dunn). This addressed the most considerable consumer hesitation of online mattress shopping: the worry that a purchased mattress would fail to meet the individual consumer's preferences. There was suddenly nothing to lose from ordering a mattress online. The growing 'bed in a box' online mattress industry quickly standardized this return policy; some brands now boast a 365-day return policy. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter [calculated](#) that if she were to take advantage of all available free trial offers, she could sleep without cost for some eight years (Kale).

And yet, these return policies bear a terrible consequence: consumers take advantage of them. There is a bloated 20% industry-average [return rate](#) for online mattress purchases. This compares to a 5% return rate for brick-and-mortar mattress purchases (Kale). In addition, discarded mattresses cannot simply be repackaged and sold on to the following consumer. They are often returned [filthy](#) and odorful, and thus they must either be donated or recycled (Kale).

In no small part due to these return policies, some twenty-seven million mattresses are thrown away annually in the US and UK ("Mattress Recycling Industry"; Kale). The utter scale of this waste is frankly difficult to overstate. Arranged side by side, these discarded

mattresses each year encompass a rectangle that would blanket central London: from Canary Wharf to Kensington, and Westminster to Hampstead. Each year in the US, [56](#) mattress recycling plants alone have the daunting task of lessening the environmental impact caused by this rubbish (Kale). Unsurprisingly, they have only the capacity to recycle around [5%](#) of discarded mattresses (“Mattress Recycling Industry”), with much of the remaining trash diverted to landfills. The picture remains similarly bleak in the UK, where over [seven](#) million mattresses were tossed in 2017, of which only [19%](#) were recycled (Dando).

This is to speak nothing of the environmental impact of the manufacturing and shipping processes required to produce these mattresses in the first place. Up to 35 kilograms of components and materials, sourced from all parts of the world, are assembled and then transported directly to one’s door, only to be thrown away after a paltry few months of use. In more ways than one, mattress returns are a terrible waste.

Casper saw success because of their direct-to-consumer [DTC] business model. This model focuses on a direct brand-to-consumer relationship, removing the need for wholesale retailers. However, the model also enables consumers to purchase goods they are not sure they need or even desire. Then, because of often generous return policies, the consumer receives no punishment for rash purchasing decisions. It is for this reason that DTC models are inherently wasteful. These effects are apparent, yet we as consumers keep enabling and supporting these wasteful practices. Why? Because they’re convenient.

Casper is hardly the only brand that utilizes the DTC model; its adoption is rapidly growing throughout consumer industries. Look no further than shaving goods brand Dollar Shave Club and eyewear brand [Warby Parker](#) (Thornhill). Warby Parker’s website features prominently the words “try on five frames without leaving home,” while Dollar Shave Club mails shaving supplies directly to the home. With Dollar Shave Club being [acquired](#) for a one billion dollar sum in 2016, and Warby Parker’s current market capitalization hovering at around six [billion](#) dollars, both have seen great success because of it (“Dollar Shave Club”; Megaw). Both have seen great success in appealing to the lazy consumer.

And yes, that is what many of us are. Lazy consumers who cannot overcome our shared thirst for convenience, even when the dire consequences of this pursuit are clear. Yet we don’t have to act like this. We could take greater care to ensure that what we order online is actually of need and use to us. Or better yet, in the case of mattress shopping, we could endure the slight inconvenience of leaving our homes and test a mattress to see if it meets our needs. Until we as consumers commit to more sustainable purchase decisions, the environment will continue to bear the consequences of our apathy.

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