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## Would you like a bag with that, Madam?

By Sarah Butler

### **Supermarkets are going green with their plastic carrier bags**

THE humble plastic bag is carrying an increasing weight of expectation — one that is being loaded up by high street retail chiefs .

Just as celebrities advertise their fashionability and wealth with Prada and Balenciaga bags, Sir Terry Leahy, head of Tesco, and Justin King, the boss of J Sainsbury, are using shopping bags to promote their green credentials .

Only this week Sir Terry boasted that Tesco was saving more than 10 million bags a week since launching a massive advertising campaign to raise awareness of a scheme to offer one loyalty card point for every bag furnished by the customer .

Mr King, meanwhile, has been promoting Sainsbury's new orange carrier bag made from 33 per cent recycled plastic, and is highlighting plans to reduce bag use by 5 per cent a year .

Undoubtedly, shoppers' interest in ethical issues, such as the use of natural resources and rubbish disposal, have pushed retailers to try to show that they are minimising waste. But the high price of oil, a key ingredient in the manufacture of plastic bags, also means that seeking alternatives and persuading shoppers to cut down bag use have combined economic and ethical considerations .

The average price of a supermarket plastic bag is 1p, up 25 per cent on a year ago and set to rise farther as the EU introduces punitive tariffs on the import of bags from China. The frenzied competition to be the greenest store in town is matched by an equally vociferous debate on which is the most ethical or environmentally friendly method of reducing bag use. An obvious method is charging for bags. Three months ago Ikea, the furniture chain, began charging 10p for each of its plastic bags, which it says are 100 per cent biodegradable. Since introducing the scheme the Swedish group says that plastic bag consumption has fallen 97 per cent .

Peter Högsted, Ikea's UK chief, says: "The majority of that change comes from customers who have shown they are very willing to participate, particularly as we donate the profit from the bags to charity".

Discount stores such as Lidl and Aldi have been charging customers for bags for years, categorising them as an additional premium service, but other retailers say that their shoppers expect free bags and charging for them would only drive people away .

The Irish Government, concerned about the number of plastic bags going to landfill waste sites, introduced a 15-cent tax on plastic bags in 2002. This cut bag use by 93 per cent, according to the Irish Marine and Natural Resources Ministry, with the bags accounting for only 0.2 per cent of litter against 5 per cent before the levy was introduced .

Both Sir Terry and Mr King have dismissed the idea of a bag tax. Mr King says: “Any tax on plastic bags is counterproductive in the medium term because then there is no reason to compete on the subject. Customers are already demanding change and we retailers are incredibly responsive to that. That is what is driving change”.

Sainsbury’s scrapped a programme to give shoppers 1p for every bag they reused because take-up was very low. But Mr King said his mind was open to a change in future .

Of course, the Government could legislate to ban the handout of free plastic bags altogether, as is the case in some other European countries .

Trevor Bish-Jones, chief executive of Woolworths, says: “Retailers don’t like bags because they are a cost. If they were banned we wouldn’t have to do them. But it would be quite difficult for the first retailer to give up bags because they would end up irritating the customer”.

## TRASH AND CARRY

About 17 billion bags are used in the United Kingdom every year

Each person in the country uses 280 bags a year

One plastic bag can take up to 500 years to decay in landfill

A total of 8 billion bags are sent to landfill every year

Only one in every 200 bags is recycled

An estimated 100,000 tonnes of plastic bags — the same weight as 70,000 cars — are thrown away in the UK each year

Each bag costs a retailer 1p

Tesco hands out an estimated 10 million a day so costing it about £100,000 a day

The supermarkets are the biggest bag users handing out about 14 billion a year or one for every £8 of sales