

# A period of change

A market disruption and what we can learn from it

# Methodology

This proprietary research study was conducted by Shelton Group and fielded in July 2018 as part of our ongoing Pulse™ research series. We surveyed a total of 2,012 respondents, using members of Survey Sampling International's online panel of more than 3.5 million U.S. internet users. The survey sample was stratified to mirror the U.S. population, using quotas for geography, age, gender, education and race; data were weighted slightly to match U.S. population distributions. The study has a +/- 2.2% margin of error.

## A period of change

There was a time – not very long ago – that certain topics were simply not mentioned in polite society, and they surely did not take center stage in mass marketing efforts. But times have changed, and few subjects remain in the proverbial closet. What was once unmentionable is now ubiquitously mentioned, and all manner of previously whispered-about facts of life are now fair game for mainstream media, advertisers, bloggers, and of course, YouTube personalities.

Yes, this is a report about feminine hygiene products – period products – and the fascinating way in which the market is shifting its thinking about them.

As taboos have faded away, consumer concerns about personal health and sustainability have grown. So have their social media interactions on those subjects and their reliance on online reviews for product decisions. We're now seeing how these factors, along with a good idea or two, have the potential to trigger a significant market disruption, and perhaps even influence consumers' brand perceptions.

You might have thought the disposable feminine hygiene product market was safe from disruption. After all, in North America alone women use – and dispose of – an estimated 12 billion menstrual pads and tampons each year.<sup>1</sup> That's a fairly sizable market and might seem like a pretty sure thing for these products' manufacturers. Certainly women will continue to set aside any concerns about single-use plastics, about all the waste going to landfills and even about personal health, not just out of habit but for the sheer convenience of conventional products.

**Right?**

<sup>1</sup> [sustainablepersonalfinance.com/a-green-cycle-alternative-feminine-hygiene-products/](https://sustainablepersonalfinance.com/a-green-cycle-alternative-feminine-hygiene-products/)



# Options

## Women now have choices

The feminine hygiene aisles at Target and Walmart, once almost solely occupied by disposable pads and tampons, now feature a dizzying array of options, including multiple brands of reusable menstrual cups, washable cloth pads, organic cotton tampons, and period panties. Along with this plethora of organic and reusable options, our

researchers noticed a proliferation of mainstream, Hollywood and social media attention being paid to the subject – particularly on reusable options – and wondered: Are significant numbers of women really leaving traditional feminine hygiene products behind? And if they are, why are they doing it?

**So we asked American women about how they manage their periods and how they're thinking about period products.**

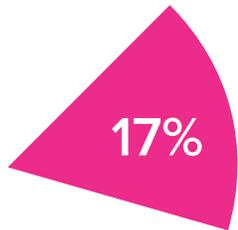
It turns out that 59% of women who expect to have a period in the future have used or considered using reusable or other non-traditional feminine hygiene products. About a third of that 59% have decided against using them, at least for now, but their reasons for that decision suggest many of them could still be convinced to give them a try.



59%

*of women who expect to have a period in the future have used or have considered using non-disposable or alternative feminine hygiene products.*

# Who are they?



## Made the Switch

Women currently using non-disposable period products are likely to be between 25 and 34 years old. More than any other segment, these women are concerned about the environment and feel a strong personal responsibility toward it.



## Considering the Switch

Women thinking about making the switch tend to be younger – mostly between 18 and 24 years old. They too have strong beliefs about the environment and share other key characteristics with women who've already Made the Switch. This is a strong indicator that they may someday make the switch.



## Considered but Decided Against

Women who say they have considered reusable period products but decided against using them are likely to be a little older than the previous groups – between 35 and 44 years old. They don't have any standout environmental attitudes, but most of them did express some concerns about the products they use. After all, something led them to consider using these other types of products.

A photograph of a person's torso wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans with a black belt. The t-shirt has text printed on it. The text is arranged in six lines, with the last line in red. The person is also wearing a black belt with a silver anchor-shaped buckle.

**mothers.  
daughters  
visionarie  
queens.  
rulers.  
women.**

Why are they switching — or thinking about it?

In all, almost 40% of women in the market for period products have switched or are still considering switching to reusables. Here's why:

# It's about the environment

The environmental impact of disposable feminine hygiene products is very much on the minds of women who use and are considering using non-disposables. Even women who have considered and decided against reusables are concerned about it.

Both the Made the Switch and Considering the Switch groups generally feel a strong personal responsibility for changing their daily habits and purchase practices to positively impact the environment. They are also much more likely than the other groups to say they search for and have consciously purchased greener products. Their top reasons vary somewhat, but mostly center on:

- Preserving natural resources
- Supporting waste reduction
- Preventing chemicals from going down the drain and into the water system

Among all women in the study, “Plastic waste in landfills” ranked as the top environmental concern about disposable feminine hygiene products.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black tank top, bright blue shorts, and brown hiking shoes, stands on a large, dark rock. She is looking out over a vast, clear blue ocean under a bright blue sky. The scene is a scenic coastal view from an elevated position.

**#1 Environmental Concern:**  
*Plastic waste in landfills*

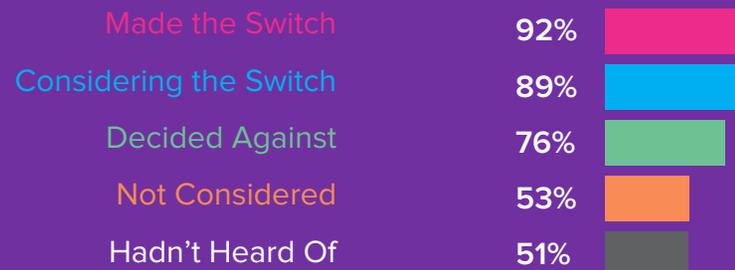
# And it's about their health

When asked “Do you ever think about the materials used in feminine hygiene products and wonder if they are safe,” most women say YES – not just those who've switched or considered switching to reusables. More than half of the women who have either Not Considered them or Hadn't Heard Of them also said yes.

Among all women in the study, “Added fragrances/perfumes” ranked as their top health concern about feminine hygiene products, followed by “Adhesive chemicals” and “Chlorine/Bleach.”

#1 Health Concern:  
***Added fragrances/perfumes***

The Materials in Disposables:  
Who wonders if they're safe?



# Beyond the environment, beyond women's health

While environmental and health concerns topped the list of reasons women use or consider using non-traditional period products, several other motivators ranked not far behind.

It's interesting to note that women who've Made the Switch selected each of the following reasons more often than those still Considering the Switch. This, along with significant anecdotal evidence from social media comments and online reviews suggests that after making the switch, women discover or become convinced of additional benefits.

## Saving money

Among women who've Made the Switch, half cited saving money as a reason they switched. Among those Considering the Switch, it was one-third.

Although the purchase price of reusable products is significantly higher than their disposable counterparts, women need to purchase them much less frequently, and over the years they're in the market, they end up saving quite a bit. For example, let's say a woman spends about \$5.00 each month on her period products, and a reusable menstrual cup costs \$25.00 (some cost a little more, some a bit less).

That means a cup user recovers her investment after just five months, and after three years, she's saved \$145.00. After 10 years – cups really can stay viable for 10 years – it adds up to \$565.00. The numbers for reusable versus disposable pads are about the same.

## Effectiveness

Nearly 40% of women who've Made the Switch and 30% of those Considering the Switch cited effectiveness as a reason for switching. Reusable cups, in particular, are lauded for virtually eliminating leaks.

## Convenience

Among women who've Made the Switch, nearly 35% cited the convenience factor. Only 16% of women Considering the Switch did. It's likely that the necessity for cleaning reusable products lowers the perception of convenience. As we again noted from social media chatter and online reviews, however, many women talk about the convenience of not having to shop for products every month and of carrying a single menstrual cup versus multiple tampons or pads.

## More Minds Might Change

*“Comfort” and “hygiene” were the main reasons women cited for not using non-disposable feminine hygiene products. While it's likely they perceive non-disposable options as not meeting their needs, with continued positive word-of-mouth and online reviews – and with growing advertising and mainstream media coverage – they could well change their minds.*



“Beyond saving tons of money ... I really enjoy the convenience ... and I’m happy about not adding more waste to the landfills and sewers.”

– Amazon purchaser

# What it means for the market

The global market for feminine hygiene products (including internal cleansers and disposable razors and blades along with tampons, pads, and panty liners) accounted for \$31.23 billion in 2017 and is expected to reach \$62.84 billion by 2026. That's a sizable market – one clearly attractive to creative market innovators who want a piece of it.

Solid numbers for reusable and organic period products are hard to come by, but there are indicators of continuing growth, starting with the sheer number of products on and coming to the market. Other evidence includes:

- In 2016, menstrual cups alone held a 3.2% (\$995 million) share of that global market, expected to reach \$1.51 billion by 2023 (CAGR 3.5%).<sup>2</sup>
- The global period panties market held a value of \$79 million in 2017 and is expected to reach \$540 million before 2026 (CAGR 27.2%).<sup>3</sup>
- The organic pad and tampon global market held a value of \$590.6 million in 2017 (19% of global total) and is projected to grow at a CAGR of 8.67% through 2023.<sup>4</sup>

Those numbers seem significant, and it's not outlandish to think that the market share for nontraditional period products could grow at an even higher rate than currently anticipated. While these new brands could turn out to be the green cleaning products of their market – struggling to compete because people don't think they work as well as their conventional counterparts – what we're seeing is that women who try the reusable products actually say they work better. It's looking more like how digital cameras completely disrupted the film market and sent Kodachrome into virtual oblivion.

*Launched in 2015, Thinx period panties sold half a million units in its first year, grew to almost \$40 million in revenue in just two years, and was in the top 20 on the Inc. 5000 2018 list of fastest growing companies in the U.S.*

## Drivers of market growth

### Product reviews

A recent survey found that 93% of consumers say online reviews impact their purchasing decisions, and the online reviews of reusable feminine hygiene products, of which there are many thousands, are overwhelmingly positive. So are the hundreds, if not thousands, of YouTube videos extolling the virtues of reusable and organic products, with collective views well into the millions.

### Word of mouth

Friend-to-friend recommendations always carry more weight than those of strangers, and with women feeling freer to talk about period matters, more and more will be getting those personal recommendations. In fact, some women are not just suggesting their friends try reusable products, they are actually evangelizing on the subject to an extended circle of acquaintances, and even strangers.

### Media/advertising

Around 20% of the women Shelton Group surveyed said that before the survey, they hadn't heard of non-disposable or other nontraditional products. With the lifting of taboos and the amount of media attention being paid to these newer options, **we expect the Women Who've Switched and Women Considering numbers to grow** – probably very soon.

<sup>2</sup> [www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/4209052/menstrual-cups-market-global-industry-analysis](http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/4209052/menstrual-cups-market-global-industry-analysis)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.digitaljournal.com/pr/3868824#ixzz5hbzjgimX>

<sup>4</sup> [www.marketresearchfuture.com/reports/organic-and-natural-tampons-market-7232](http://www.marketresearchfuture.com/reports/organic-and-natural-tampons-market-7232)



“I’ve gotten at least five people to join in on the menstrual cup, because they have someone they can talk to in order to ask all of the uncomfortable questions.”

– Commenter on YouTube video, “Why Aren’t Menstrual Cups More Popular?”

# What this “lady business” means for other businesses

Despite all these warning signs, most manufacturers of disposable period products don't seem to feel particularly threatened ... yet. But they should at least be paying attention, because someday, the growing market for reusable and organic options might do more than affect their sales. If they choose not to play in that arena or even if they are late to the game, it could impact public perceptions of their entire brand. Consciously or unconsciously, people might think the brand doesn't really care about the environment or their customers' health concerns.

Businesses in other product and service categories should also pay attention, because this story of impending market disruption is more than just a cautionary tale for businesses in this one industry. As sustainability awareness, especially of the impacts of single-use products, and health concerns of consumers continue to grow, more products – particularly disposables – will likely become subject to the same kind of sea change.



# Sustainability awareness – yes, it’s a thing, yes it matters

Shelton Group’s annual Eco Pulse™ studies have shown that over the past few years, the number of people who think average people should be taking concrete steps to reduce their environmental impact has remained high, at between 85 and 90%. So has the number of people who feel a responsibility to change their purchase habits and practices to positively impact the environment, which jumped from 55% in 2012 to 71% in 2018.

While people are feeling a personal responsibility for making a positive impact, they’re also holding businesses responsible for doing the same. The 2018 Eco Pulse™ study revealed that 63% of Americans say a company’s environmental reputation has at least a moderate impact on their purchase decisions, and 48% say they have

either chosen one product over another or stopped purchasing a product based on the environmental record of its manufacturer. Of these, 52% could provide a specific brand name.

They also want your brand to stand for something other than making money. Through a separate survey last year, we learned that 86% of consumers believe that companies should take a stand for social issues, and most will support companies that do through their purchases. We wonder how long it will be before consumers put brands selling disposable products on their “don’t buy from” list simply because they sell disposables.



**Threat or  
opportunity?**



Despite the complacency of most conventional period product manufacturers, change is happening in the feminine hygiene marketplace. Blockbuster didn't think Netflix would matter much, and who foresaw the demise of taxis? Not cab companies – it was Uber and Lyft. And look at what's happening with single-use plastics – all the media attention being paid to plastic waste and the bans proposed and enacted in cities and countries around the world.

Brands with products that lie in the crosshairs of social and environmental pressures could face a market threat – or an opportunity. Ignore the pressures, and consumers just might turn their backs on those products. Respond to them, and very good things could happen.

So innovate. Make products that are fully effective, inherently sustainable, and convenient to find, buy and use. Then, shout the story of your commitment to people and the planet from every rooftop.



Shelton Group is the nation's leading marketing communications firm focused exclusively on sustainability. If you're trying to build a brand around energy responsibility and sustainability – or sell products that minimize environmental impact – we understand your marketing challenges like no one else.

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