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Dell: Upcycling Ocean Plastics Through Supply Chain Innovation

Piyush Bhargava, vice president of global operations at Dell, glanced out his office window. It was a sunny and hot late-August day in Round Rock, Texas in 2017. The sunshine reminded him of the beaches in Indonesia and he could not help but wish he were back there where his goals seemed much more straightforward. It was not long ago that he and his team had been in South Asia surveying the availability of ocean plastics waste, meeting with processors, and enjoying more than their fair share of bakso.ⁱ Indeed, the trip to Asia had been a huge success. The team, supported by two University of Michigan Tauber Institute for Global Operations¹ interns, had not only proven that incorporating ocean plastics into Dell's packaging for products was feasible, but that doing so could deliver both meaningful cost savings over conventional sources of plastic and a substantial diversion of waste from the oceans.

Bhargava had been happy to see the results but he also knew now that the real work was only just beginning: developing and certifying the supply chain that the team recommended and finding ways to utilize meaningful volumes of ocean plastics, through both Dell products and packaging and creative partnerships with other companies. Even by the most conservative estimates, millions of tons of plastic enter the ocean every year. The scope of the environmental crisis was staggering and it would take a concerted effort well beyond Dell's scale to fully address the problem.

Bhargava glanced back at his computer. His Chief Supply Chain Officer, Kevin Brown, wanted a strategic plan for how to proceed with the Ocean Plastics Initiative by the following week. But even with the recent successes, there were still many unknowns. Dell prided itself on being a leader in both packaging innovation and supply chain management, but this latest initiative would test its mettle in both. The list of internal stakeholders from whom Bhargava needed buy-in to make the ocean plastics supply chain operational and certified was staggering. Even more challenging, Michael Dell had a vision of the ocean plastics supply chain being open to any company interested in following suit, and to that end Dell was positioning itself to lead a consortium of like-minded companies to drive major demand for ocean plastics.

ⁱ A traditional Indonesian meatball soup dish.

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