

We have a three-pronged approach, which is environmental, social, and solidarity-based. And in fact, what I like about our project is that people with disabilities will themselves contribute to helping people living in precarious situations.

BNP Paribas Personal Finance invites you to discover On The Way, the podcast exploring paths to environmentally friendly consumption. Entrepreneurs, people from the world of business and researchers, On The Way gives a floor to those who, day after day, are helping to develop a more sustainable consumption.

Welcome, and I hope you enjoy listening! Hello, my name is Pauline Grumel, and I'm the founder of Unisoap. Unisoap is the first French association whose mission is to collect and recycle used hotel soaps so as to give access to hygiene to people in need.

I come from a literary background, and then I studied communications and marketing, which led me, at the age of 25, to create my own company, I created a communications agency and I worked with major brands.

It was a job that gave me a lot in terms of creativity, so I already had this sense of entrepreneurship. I wanted to create, to develop new projects. I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I did that for almost ten years and after a certain time, I needed to give more meaning, more value to my work.

So in 2017, I set up Unisoap. Unisoap is a non-profit organisation, so our economic model is essentially based on sponsorship. So our first sponsors, our first financial supporters, were our partner hotels, who made donations to the association.

But we also receive donations from foundations, from companies, from individuals, and from the general public, and all these donations allow us to finance our activities, as we donate our soaps to associations.

I really wanted to create an association, because the aim is to give free access to hygiene to people in need, who don't have the means to buy hygiene products. And there's a real need.

Associations are sorely lacking in these hygiene products, because they're often expensive, and people don't think about donating them, unlike food. And yet they're a real necessity. It's true that people say that hygiene affects health, but it's also human dignity and self-esteem.

So it's really important. The idea came to me during meetings with people, during hotel stays, during exchanges with hoteliers, asking them "but what do you do with all your soaps?" They all told me that they went in the bin, and so I started doing some research.

I saw that there were organisations abroad, but none in France. I thought great, let's get something going, and also address the needs of hoteliers. So that's why I wasn't afraid to set out on this new adventure, in 2017.

I wasn't afraid of entrepreneurship, quite the contrary: it challenged me to think that we were the first, that we were the first ones in France to launch soap recycling. And there you go: that's how it started. It's thought that today, around 51 million soaps are thrown away every year by hotels in France.

These were our own estimates, as at the time we had no data. Because of course, when hotels throw away soaps, they don't count them. So that's what we estimate, that there are around three million people who can't afford basic hygiene products.

Unisoap's mission is to collect and recycle used hotel soaps, so as to give access to hygiene to people in need. So we have a three-pronged approach, which is environmental, as the aim is to reduce hotel waste, and also social, as our soaps are recycled in a supported employment centre that employs young people with disabilities. And finally, solidarity, as our ultimate mission is to give access to hygiene to as many people as possible. Our activities really got started in 2018, in

February-March, with our first partner hotel, the Lyon Métropole hotel. And then came our second, third, and fourth partner hotels. We got started, I'd say, at the end of 2018, with collections, because we had to wait until the hotels had enough soaps before we could go and collect them.

So as 2018 went on, things were developing really well. In 2019, we were carrying on setting up partnerships with hotels, we were carrying on with collections, and we were working on the recycling process, carrying out tests,

and we were also looking for funds, because we had to finance all of that, we also had to buy machines. At the start of 2020, we bought our own machines. And then suddenly, lockdown hit. So we had to stop everything, and then at the end of 2020, we were able to resume training young people.

And then in 2021, we did our first distribution, and the whole of 2021 was the year of production, recycling and distribution. And here we are, already in 2022. And now we realise that we need to recycle even more.

So we're already thinking about a second recycling centre. We've got past those two years of Covid, and we can really see that since the beginning of 2022, there's been a real recovery, especially from the hotels that are contacting us, who have guests

again, we're also seeing collections picking up. We're getting quite large volumes, and the aim is to continue to develop, to have even more impact, to collect even more soaps, and distribute even more.

2021 was the year that things really got going for Unisoap, when we distributed over 15,000 bars of soap to our partner charities. We've collected over seven tons of soap since we started. We'd like to increase production this year.

How does collection work? Collection is fairly straightforward. When the maids go to clean rooms, once the guests have left, they put the soaps to one side, instead of throwing them in the bin,

they put them in boxes. And then, when they've reached a certain volume, they call us, and we send our courier over to pick them up and take them to our recycling centre in the Lyon region.

Here, at a supported employment centre, the Esat Myriade, in Vaulx-en-Velin. And this is where the process begins. So we worked for two years with an engineer on an entire recycling process, and sourcing different machines, which allow us to get a soap that's like new, which is then

given to partner associations, as we work with around twenty partner associations throughout France, such as Restos du Cœur, Secours Populaire, the Salvation Army, and Solidarité Internationale. And the aim is to cover all the needs of the beneficiaries.

All different types of beneficiaries, whether they're people living on the street, families in precarity, isolated women, and even students. And so, with these different partnerships with these associations, we manage to reach the maximum number of people.

At the beginning nobody knew anything about us, so I had to knock on hotels' doors to explain our initiative. And I got pretty good feedback straight away, in fact a very good welcome from hoteliers, who were already involved in eco-initiatives, such as recycling plastics, paper, food, and so

recycling soap fitted right into that overall CSR approach. And so I remember, our first partner hotel was the Lyon Métropole hotel, and the director, Leslie Moreau, the first hotel to enter into an agreement with us, and so together we signed our first partnership, a sponsorship agreement with the association.

Since then, we've now got over 250 partner hotels, throughout France. And it's still developing, we've got hotels contacting us every day to get information about our initiative and become partners.

So now there's no need for us to get on the phone and call them, like we did at the start. They come to us, so it's really nice. An interesting story is that there are hotels, where the chambermaids and housekeepers told us that they had been looking for an organisation like ours, and that

for years they'd already been saving soaps, and so we contacted them. They were really happy, because they already had a stock of soaps to donate to us. We send a small communication kit to hotels.

So they can showcase the fact that they're partners of the association, and so they have a three-pronged approach. They have a certificate that they can display in the hotel, they can publicise it in their rooms, and they can write about it on their room directories.

They can also communicate on their social networks, and on their websites. And we also have all our partner hotels listed on our website, and we regularly communicate about our different partner hotels. One day, a lady sent us a message and asked us where she could see the whole list of

Unisoap partner hotels, because she wanted to spend her holidays at a hotel that recycled its soaps, and so she could look directly on our website and choose her hotel. The challenge for our recycling process was quite significant, because we had to be able to meet European cosmetic standards, which are very strict.

So we had to design a process that was both suited to people with disabilities who we were going to have to train, and who weren't professionals at the start. And then there were high standards to meet, as our soaps had to undergo tests, we're subject to GMP, good manufacturing practices, just like

any other company in the sector. So that's why we had to think about the process from start to finish. And now, on a daily basis, there are a lot of documents to fill out, a lot of paperwork, and there's a whole follow-up and traceability protocol for products which is required. At Unisoap we only collect

solid soaps. So everything that's not liquid, and you can also recycle solid shampoos, solid conditioners, even solid shower gels, everything that's solid. The advantage of solids, is that they are way more eco-friendly than liquids, because there's no plastic packaging, there's no

water. So the carbon footprint is reduced, because, for example, to transport the same amount of solid soap in one lorry, it would take the equivalent of fourteen lorries for liquid soap. It's also more hygienic.

Personally, I can see all the benefits of solids, having already moved over to solids myself for the last year, and washing my hair with solid shampoos. We try to make hotels aware sometimes, when they switch to liquid soap dispensers.

It's not necessarily more eco-friendly, because at some point there's going to be waste, whereas with Unisoap, we guarantee zero waste. And often the packaging is a bit of paper, or a small cardboard box, which is easier

to recycle later on. So anyway, we're trying to encourage hotels to go all-solid. We have some hotel chains who have taken that step. And so we often collect four different solid products at the same hotel.

We also have hotels that have recently carried out tests, and they've been really well received by their guests, very good feedback, because they were afraid that if they took away liquid products, their customers would react, and in fact it was the opposite, it was very well received.

At the beginning, when I came up with this project, I created the association. I imagined that our soaps would go overseas, and go to developing countries, in Asia, in Africa, where there are children dying from diseases relating to a lack of hygiene, such as influenza or dysentery.

And in fact, I quickly caught on and I realised that there was a huge need right here in France, from people who can't afford basic hygiene products.

So in fact currently we're working exclusively locally in France. First of all, covering the needs of people in France, and then maybe going to other countries later on. So we did our first international operation, exceptionally, for Ukraine.

That was in March, we made over 1000 kits that went to Ukraine, and we were really happy because in fact we were able to get donations from cosmetics brands, notably the Pierre Fabre group, who gave us a shampoo, a toothpaste and a toothbrush to add to our soaps.

We put these in small kits, and they were able to go to people who are living through the war. There were very specific needs for these products, and so we did it in partnership with Solidarité Internationale, who carried out on-site scouting beforehand to assess needs

. And so we could really be sure that once it was sent, it was distributed to the right people. How does distribution work at Unisoap? It's pretty simple. We set up partnerships with associations. Our first partner association was with Les Restos du Cœur.

In January 2021 we did our first distribution with them. We were able to visit the site and see the reaction of the beneficiaries. And I have to admit that it was a great moment for me to see the achievement of our work of over three years, and to hear a lady saying when she saw the soap, "Oh

wow, it's so pretty, and it smells good too". We were really happy. And then after that, we were contacted by a lot of associations. Unfortunately, we weren't able to meet the demands of all the associations, and in any case, it was important to diversify the type of associations.

For example, we work in Lyon with Forum Réfugiés, for asylum seekers who are staying in emergency accommodation. We work with the Salvation Army, we work with Secours Populaire, we work with smaller associations doing outreach, and associations that distribute to students.

We try to select associations according to needs, and of course associations that have a certain credibility, and that have the establishments or the means to distribute directly to people. I think our business came at just the right time.

Definitely, ten years ago, hotels and people weren't necessarily ready for this type of initiative. And today, in fact, there's a global approach to lots of issues, whether it's paper recycling, plastics recycling, food recycling, and so on.

And nowadays, hotels really want to make the effort. It matters to them, but it also matters to their customers. I remember a story that a hotelier told me. They said to me "We have Swiss customers who came and

they said to me: we liked the room very much, we liked the welcome, we liked the breakfast, but we won't come back to your hotel. But why not? Because you don't have a CSR policy". And so these days, it's even an element in the choices of certain customers.

They choose their hotel precisely on this element of eco-responsibility, of having sustainable policies, of having products that are locally sourced. So it's really important. And I think there's a real awareness now about these topics that we didn't necessarily have before.

We'd like to have even more impact. So setting up partnerships with more hotels. We've got just over 250 partner hotels throughout France, from large chains, to independent hotels. There are 18,000 hotels in France.

So we still have room to grow and the objective is to continue to develop. And then, why not also move into other geographical areas, other countries, as we've had lots of requests, and so it would be a dream for me to see lots of other Unisoaps in other countries.

If I had to give one piece of advice to listeners of On the Way in terms of better consumption, let's say in the bathroom, it would be to opt for solid products. As you avoid plastics, you avoid transporting water, and it's also much easier for traveling.

Now there are solid shampoos, there are even solid facial cleansers, and even solid toothpastes. And so the aim is really to go for zero plastic, zero waste, and of course to sort your waste as much as possible.

Because in fact we often don't think about sorting our bathroom waste as well. So it's good to have packaging that's made of paper or cardboard. But if you don't sort them, they won't be recycled.

One last piece of advice is that when you choose a hotel, try to see if they have any eco-friendly initiatives. And if you're a hotel, and you're listening, then please don't hesitate to contact us at Unisoap if you also want to get involved with us to give a second life to your soaps.

And then, if you're a private individual, you can also be our best ambassadors, because when you go to a hotel, you can talk about Unisoap to hoteliers who aren't yet partners. You can find all the episodes of On The Way on your favourite podcast platforms, and on the [personal-finance.bnpparibas](https://personal-finance.bnpparibas.com) website.

The links and references cited by our guests can be found in the introductory text of each episode. And if you'd like to take to our microphone, please contact nicolas.meunier@bnpparibas.com ...see you very soon.