

44 Battle of the brands

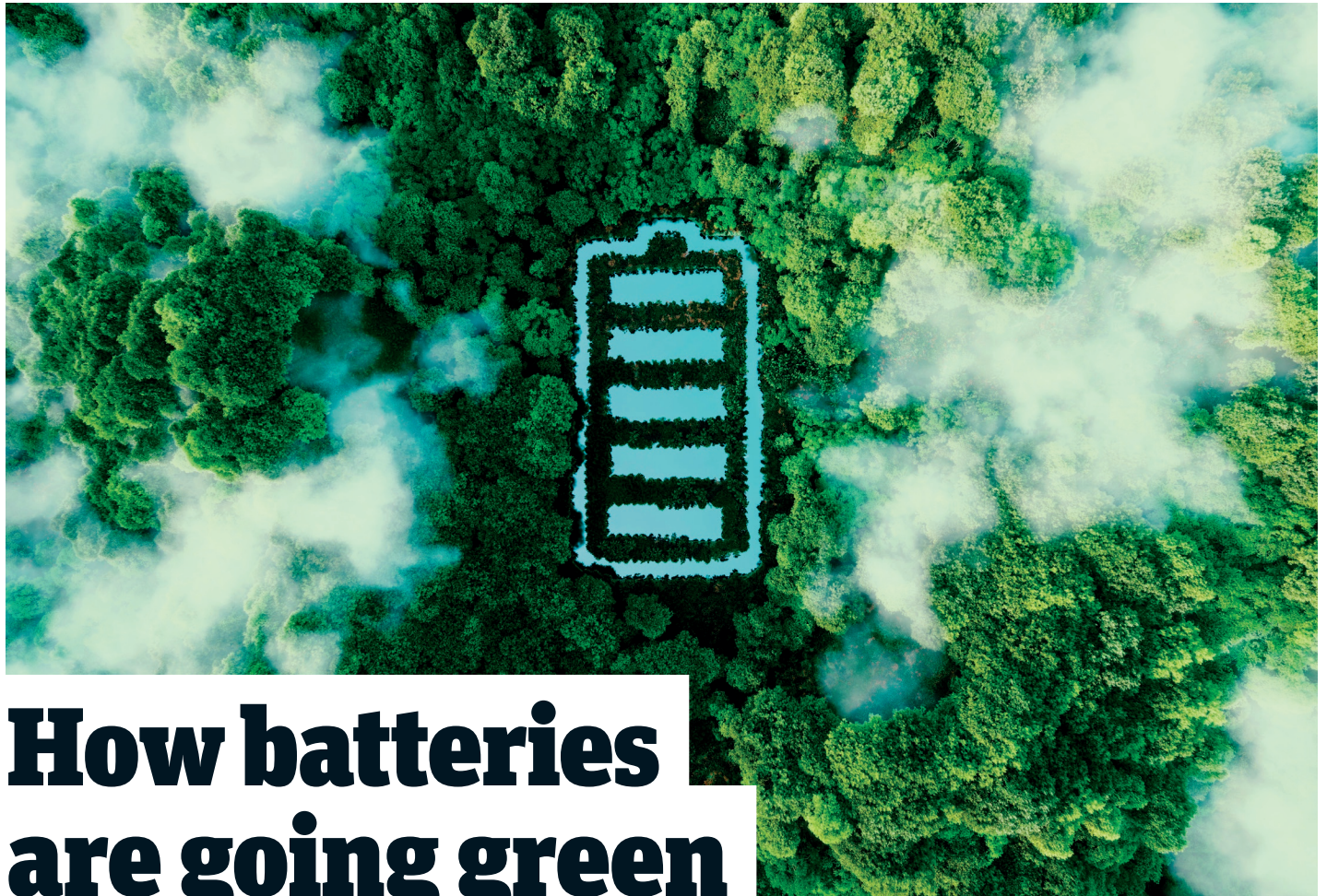
As average prices rise, which brands are benefiting – and which are going flat?

44 Education drive

Battery brands are starting with kids when it comes to teaching consumers to recycle properly

45 E-cigarette recycling

E-cigs are being wastefully binned – but even those being recycled are posing a problem



How batteries are going green

Improper battery disposal is causing ever more fires. Brands are mounting an education drive and upping their green strategies

George Nott

Batteries are under fire. That's because they keep causing fires – on rubbish trucks and in waste facilities up and down the country.

Last year, a survey by non-profit Material Focus identified more than 700 battery fires in waste and recycling systems across the UK. Incidents are up more than threefold: a separate 2021 study identified 201 waste facility fires caused by batteries.

The issue has got so bad that last month, the National Fire Chiefs Council launched a campaign and safety film on the subject. It features a waste truck driver talking about his narrow escape with such a fire. "In the space of a couple of minutes, it went from a bit of smoke to two-foot flames leaping out of the waste truck," he recalls.

Luckily, he emerged unscathed. "However,

these types of fires, if on a residential street, could cause untold damage," he warns. "As it is, our trucks are often seriously damaged, costing hundreds of thousands of pounds."

Such fires, as well as those that break out in waste treatment and recycling facilities, are a concern for crews. "People are often surprised to hear batteries can cause fires in both bin lorries and waste plants, but they do," says Mark Andrews, the NFCC's waste fires lead. "As we use and dispose of more electronic devices, these incidents are not rare."

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So how are battery brands looking to tackle this hazard? And what else are they doing to mitigate their environmental impact?

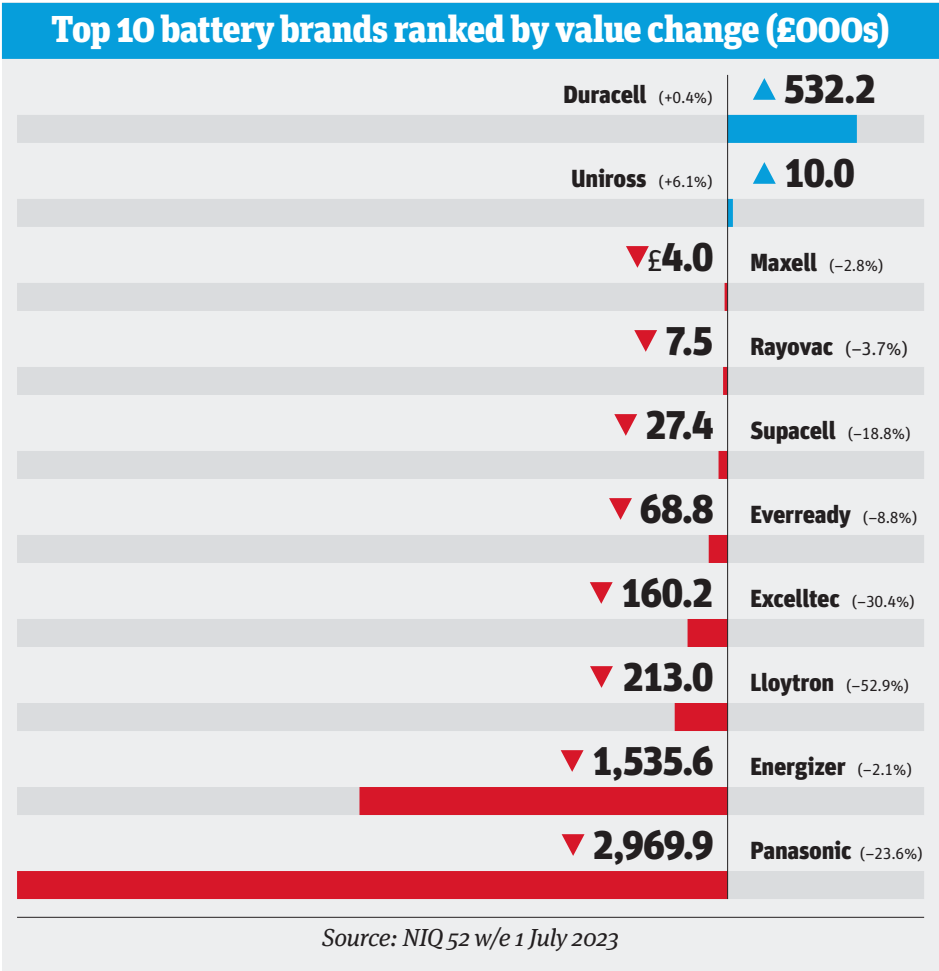
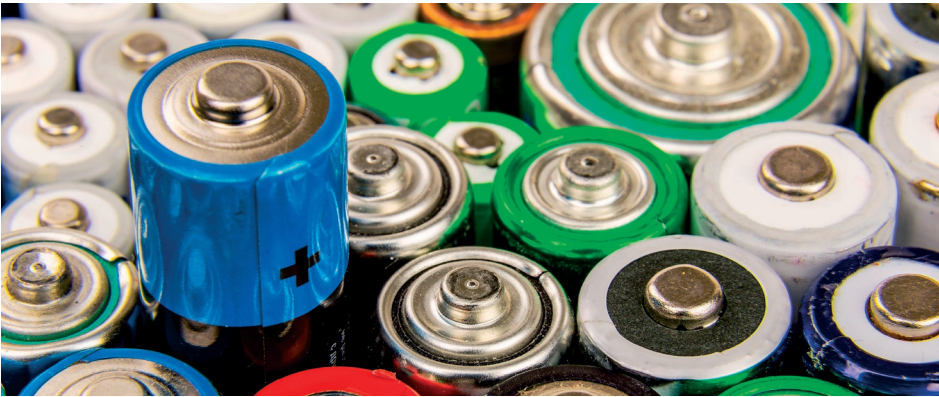
There is clearly a consumer education job to do around battery disposal. If batteries end up inside bins or household recycling lorries, they will usually get crushed as part of the disposal process.

"This increases the chances that they could be punctured and self-combust, setting fire to dry and flammable waste and household recycling around them," explains Scott Butler, executive director of Material Focus.

Instead they need to be disposed of in specialist facilities, provided by both local authorities and retailers.

"There's really no excuse for throwing them in your bin at home," says Councillor Linda Green, chair of the South Tyne & Wear Waste Management Partnership.

"Used batteries can be recycled in so ➔



- The average price of a pack of batteries has risen 4.6% year on year, though this is significantly lower than overall grocery inflation, which now stands at over 12%.
- Despite the price increase, total category value has fallen 0.6% to £256.2m. This is down to shoppers buying fewer batteries compared with last year, driving down unit sales by 4.8%.
- Nine of the top 10 brands recorded a decline in unit sales – the exception being

- Uniross, which delivered an increase of 1.3%.
- Unit sales of top-selling brand Duracell fell 5.6% – the smallest volume dip of the top seven battery brands. That was mitigated by price increases, which drove a 0.4% increase in its value sales.
 - Lloytron experienced the largest percentage volume fall, of 51.2%. But Panasonic suffered the largest absolute decline.
 - Own-label batteries are 60% cheaper than the category average, at £2.73

- per unit. That’s made them a popular choice in the cost of living crisis: own-label unit sales are up 9.4% and values are up 7.8%.
- “The strong performance would indicate shoppers are switching to own-label products in categories that are discretionary, such as batteries,” says NIQ senior client analyst Ryan Wells.

NIQ
Nielsen IQ monitors weekly data from a national network of EPOS scanners to represent sales in grocery multiples, co-ops, multiple off-licences, independents, forecourts, convenience multiples, symbols and online grocery retailers.

“Most supermarkets, DIY shops or anywhere that sells batteries have recycling points”

⚙ many places these days. Most supermarkets, DIY shops or anywhere that sells batteries, as well as many public buildings have battery recycling points.”

Indeed, supermarkets are obliged to safely dispose of old electrical items when shoppers are buying a new one, under waste electrical and electronic equipment regulations.

The problem is, large portions of the general public are unaware of the need to separate batteries from general waste. A quarter of households throw them away unsafely, according to research by Material Focus late last year. Of those households, 45% were unaware of the dangers of not safely disposing of batteries. And 40% were unaware of any information regarding proper disposal.

Leading by example

So brands are working to make that information more widespread. Duracell is looking to “lead by example” says the company’s sustainability manager Gavin Cunningham.

“We’ve added a ‘battery recycling finder’ to our website, making it easy for consumers to find the nearest place,” he points out. “We have also created a partnership with Google and large retailers to maximise the visibility of stores offering drop-off points when a shopper searches for ‘battery recycling’ using the Google platform. That’s added over 5,000 sites in the UK.”

Cunningham admits shoppers can struggle to find bins in stores. To tackle this, Duracell is working with retail partners “to increase visibility of the collection drums” he adds.

In recent years, the leading battery brand has gone one step further with its Big Battery Hunt initiative. It gives out educational resources – fronted by the Duracell bunny – to primary schools across the UK. These not only cover the environment impact of improper disposal, but run collection competitions with prizes up for grabs. In the four years of the programme, thousands of schools have recycled over 17 million batteries.

“We encourage children, who tend to be the main consumers of batteries within households, to recycle used batteries at their local retailers,” Cunningham says.

These sustainable efforts don’t stop at the disposal of batteries, though. Brands are also working to minimise the environmental impact of their packaging. Duracell, for instance, now uses up to 98% recycled

cardboard in its packs – and is looking into stretch wrap using recycled material.

Energizer, meanwhile, has transitioned to more environmentally friendly inks and coatings for packaging “to improve recyclability”. The paperboard in its packs also includes up to 50% recycled material.

The UK’s largest distributor of batteries, Supreme – responsible for over 30% of the market – told *The Grocer* it was “delighted to confirm that almost all the batteries it sells come in plastic-free packaging and include recycled materials”.

Another way battery brands are doing their bit for the planet is to promote the reuse of products – specifically rechargeables.

Supreme, which distributes brands including Duracell, Energizer, Panasonic and JCB, points to its planned marketing campaign this Christmas. This will be “focused on rechargeable batteries to ensure its trade and retail customers continue to be informed of the environmental and cost benefits” says CEO Sandy Chadha.

Given around 40% of Supreme’s total battery sales are generated between October and December, it could have significant impact. And potentially boost the rechargeables market, which has long been in decline.

But there is nuance in the argument that rechargeable lines are better for the environment. “They’ve been described as being a more sustainable alternatives to primary cells,” says Cunningham. “They would supposedly require less energy and produce less waste, are less expensive and more state-of-the-art. However, such conclusions are not universally applicable or simply not true.”

It very much depends on what they are used for, he says. For high-powered devices like computer console controllers, they make sense. “However, more than half of all battery-powered devices in households require medium to lower power. For those appliances, primary batteries have a better economic and ecological performance,” he stresses. It also matters where the electricity to recharge the batteries is sourced: from renewable or fossil fuels.

Cunningham says shoppers often don’t see the value in rechargeables. “Gamers are the exception to the rule, especially Xbox users. This is something that we communicate at shelf in stores such as Sainsbury’s with point-of-sale material,” he says.

Clearly there is some debate on what it means to be sustainable. But whatever route brands take, environmental cues make business sense. In its latest financial results, Energizer concedes “increased focus... on sustainability issues may have an adverse effect on our business”.

And the last thing batteries brands want is for growing sustainability concerns to sap their power.



How to solve the e-cig recycling conundrum?

Sales of disposable vapes have rocketed over the past couple of years. But the ‘e’ part of these e-cigarettes is causing controversy.

They are made of some of the planet’s most valuable resources – steel, aluminium, copper and lithium – but spent devices frequently aren’t recycled.

According to Material Focus, 1.3 million single-use vapes get binned a week. A lost opportunity, it says,

given the lithium inside vapes “could be powering the green economy”.

To be properly disposed of, users must take their devices back to retailers or to local authority recycling centres. But only around half of used devices make it there. The rest end up as litter – prompting calls for an outright ban – or in landfill.

Those devices that do reach proper disposal facilities are causing issues as well. The batteries still need to be removed, but the devices aren’t designed to readily come apart.

“Waste electrical and electronic equipment facilities in the UK have

been making innovative yet crude attempts at dismantling vapes using bespoke steel dyes and labour-intensive processes,” says Cathy Cook, chair of the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee.

As policymakers search for a solution that doesn’t negatively affect smokers’ efforts to ditch cigarettes, some have suggested making vapes easier to recycle and reuse.

According to a Zero Waste Scotland report commissioned by the Scottish government, the lithium polymer batteries used in some of the most popular e-cigs could be recharged 500 times if the product allowed for this.

One policy option proposed in the report was a total, country-wide ban on single-use vapes. Another suggested making it a requirement for batteries to be easily removed and replaced.

