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SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

PACKAGING

Buy smarter

Products and packaging labeled "green" or "environmentally friendly" have gained visibility in the marketplace. Consumers have reached a higher level of environmental awareness and are interested in knowing more about the life cycle environmental impacts of the products they buy. Life cycle environmental impacts include those occurring during the manufacture, use, and disposal of products and packaging. Studies show that consumers are willing to sacrifice some level of convenience for the environment.


Packaging essentials

Thirty percent of our household waste is packaging. Packaging is an essential part of our marketing and distribution systems. Most of what we buy was wrapped in one or several layers of packaging at some time on its way from producer to consumer.

Packaging performs several functions:

- ✓ Prevents food spoilage
- ✓ Complies with government regulations
- ✓ Protects products during shipping
- ✓ Protects food from tampering
- ✓ Provides information/instructions about the contents
- ✓ Provides appeal for marketing
- ✓ Protects consumers against toxic contents

Keep in mind that many packages are designed specifically to provide an extra measure of consumer convenience. Some examples are ready-to-eat, microwavable, heat-and-eat, single-serving, disposable, and no-cleanup products.

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Packaging choices

Most packaging uses materials efficiently to minimize energy, transportation, and material costs. The packaging industry continues to refine and improve its product packaging. Some improvements allow for thinner, lighter weight materials that reduce energy and material costs and the volume of garbage. Other improvements include making products more convenient to use, enhancing the safety or shelf life of the product, or both.

Some packaging serves little purpose. It wastes energy, valuable materials, and contributes to the waste disposal problem.

Many products are available to consumers in a wide choice of packaging options. Juice, for example, can be purchased in cans, bottles, jars, cartons, or single-serve boxes. It is available either shelf-stable, refrigerated, or as a frozen concentrate. Consumers should choose the type of packaging that has the least environmental impact in terms of energy use, amount of materials used, and recyclability.

Fallacy of the commons

You may think your part won't be enough to matter. Perhaps the story of the "fallacy of the commons" will change your mind. In Colonial days, the village green or "commons" was used for several things. One of them was for farmers to let their oxen, horses, or cows graze while they took care of business. After a time, one farmer got the idea of leaving his cow on the commons overnight and then for a week at a time. Other farmers noticed this idea and started to leave their cows on the commons too. At first, there was

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plenty of grass to go around. Each individual animal was not enough to cause a problem. Soon, however, the commons was overgrazed, and then there was no grass left.

So it is with garbage. Your garbage by itself is not the problem. But when you add it to the garbage of your neighbors, your town, your county, and the whole state, then the "commons" problem has grown to huge proportions.

Do your part by following the five Rs: **Reduce** the amount of packaging you buy and throw away. **Reuse** and **recycle** whenever possible; **reject** packaging that is unsatisfactory; and **respond** to producers and retailers to let them know how you feel.

- ✓ Take your grocery bags back to the store to be recycled.
- ✓ Take your own shopping bag for small purchases.
- ✓ Select products with the most purposeful, least wasteful packaging. Avoid buying goods with unnecessary packaging, such as bubble-packs that wrap items in plastic seal with cardboard backing just for display or double packages such as a bottle inside a box.
- ✓ Buy products in the largest quantity possible. One large jug of cleaner uses less packaging per ounce than several small bottles. You can refill a smaller spray bottle or dispenser from a large jug.
- ✓ Buy in the size that you will use and not waste.
- ✓ Consider the amount of packaging in light of the amount of product. Is there more packaging than product?
- ✓ Buy concentrates then dilute them at home in a larger, reusable container. Products available as concentrates include fabric starch, fabric softener, clothes detergent, fruit drink, fruit juice, and liquid soap.
- ✓ Look for products with reusable dishes or those that require you to use a dish of your own. Reuse bags, containers, boxes, and other items.
- ✓ Fresh fruits and vegetables are available unpackaged. Avoid using plastic bags for small purchases such as a couple of cucumbers, cloves of garlic, or lemons.

- ✓ Convenience foods usually involve extra packaging. Some premeasured drink mixes, for example, have a measured portion of the product in a plastic cup with a lid. Several of these are placed inside another container. Using the premeasured container saves time, but measuring drink mix powder from a larger container doesn't take that much longer.
- ✓ Fast food restaurants produce a large volume of trash since all their serving materials are throwaways. Eat in the restaurant when you can to save the bag, Styrofoam or cardboard container, and other extra pieces of packaging from the drive-thru.
- ✓ Buy packages that can be recycled and make sure to recycle them.
- ✓ Speak to store managers about packaging reduction. Ask clerks not to double or triple wrap purchases. Make suggestions to eliminate prepackaging of produce. Suggest that stores stock refills and offer larger sizes of products.
- ✓ Encourage simpler, less complex packaging. Can label information be printed on a hanging tag or a peel-off layer, eliminating the need for a box? Perhaps a small tag or booklet could be tied to the product to give user instructions. Less packaging can save money for the manufacturer, the consumer, and the waste manager; help protect the environment; and save resources.
- ✓ Use consumer hotlines. Explain the need for the five Rs and why you support them.

You can play an important role in reducing the solid waste problem. When you spend your money, you support the products that reflect your values. To actively support the environment in the marketplace, make choices according to the five Rs. Every individual's participation is necessary to make a difference.

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