



Sunday, April 17, 2005, 12:00 A.M. Pacific

Permission to reprint or copy this article/photo **must** be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Make It Count: **Conscientious Consumer**

Transport packaging makes up bulk of waste

By **Tom Watson**

Special to the Seattle Times

Being an EcoConsumer isn't about being "politically correct" or even "environmentally correct." It's about spending your money and time wisely, while keeping in mind your impact on the environment. An EcoConsumer balances consuming and conserving.

In this new feature, which will run occasionally on the Sunday Make It Count page, I'll help you see through the hype on both sides. I'll look behind the scenes at environmental and consumer issues to show how they intersect.

For nearly 20 years, I've worked on waste reduction and other environmental issues here in Seattle — the past 13 years with the King County Solid Waste Division. In this column, I'll share what I've learned from county residents and businesses I work with, and from regional and national experts. With the 35th Earth Day coming up Friday, this seems like the perfect time to start this feature.

When I tell people what I do for a living, they often mention their environmental concerns. For example, I frequently hear gripes about packaging. But when people say, "Isn't wasteful packaging a serious environmental problem?" my response is, "No, not the way you might think."

Overpackaging does have environmental and financial costs. Local governments and their residents pay for the disposal or recycling of excess packaging. But by and large, consumer-product companies do a good job on packaging.

Sometimes packaging is in our best interest — like keeping food safe. Sometimes it's in the company's best interest — like using the lightest, least-bulky materials available to save money on manufacturing and shipping, or using strong packaging to protect the product or to discourage shoplifting.

Have you ever sworn in disgust when a few batteries or a small toy are sealed in an oversized, hard-to-open plastic package? Manufacturers do that to keep those products from walking out of the store, and it's fairly effective.

Here in the eco-conscious Northwest, some people hate anything made of plastic. But because it's lighter, plastic packaging uses fewer resources than glass or cardboard packaging. Future innovations in plastic packaging will use less materials and extend the shelf-life of foods such as ice cream and prepared meals.

Most waste-management experts believe that the biggest waste problem comes from what's called "transport packaging," which consumers never see. This includes the pallets and boxes used to ship ingredients and parts between producers, manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers.

Companies can reduce transport packaging by reusing pallets or replacing cardboard boxes with reusable

plastic containers. But many companies haven't made these changes because they don't want to pay the up-front costs.

There's also great potential for reducing packaging when companies ship large quantities of products to business users. For example, Dell and Gateway are testing prototype reusable containers here in Seattle, for shipping eight or more computers at a time. Gateway and Dell developed these reusable shipping crates because major customers — including the City of Seattle and King County — asked them to.

So, the next time you cuss about wasteful packaging, think about the reasons behind the package. If the package still seems wasteful, write the manufacturer and let it know how you feel. That's the way changes happen.

Tom Watson, tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

[Copyright © 2005 The Seattle Times Company](#)