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## Manufacturers reduce packaging, but it's not yet a wrap

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Whether we're buying a computer or a loaf of bread, it's the product we want, so who cares about the packaging?

Nearly everyone, as it turns out. Consumers frequently complain about wasteful packaging, while manufacturers pour millions of dollars into packaging improvements to keep their costs down and please consumers.

Governments strongly support packaging reduction, since they and taxpayers bear most of the costs of packaging disposal and recycling. Nearly one-third of all consumer waste consists of packaging.

**Q:** Doesn't some packaging actually help the environment and consumers?

**A:** Absolutely. Modern packaging often prevents waste by protecting products and preserving food. Packaging can also thwart shoplifting, and all of those functions of packaging help manufacturers, retailers and consumers save money.

**Q:** So what's the problem?

**A:** Large and bulky packaging abounds, partly for marketing and anti-theft reasons. Sometimes the product itself dictates packaging waste. For instance, Americans buy 34 billion single-serving plastic water bottles every year, and fewer than 25 percent get recycled.

Since most bottled water is just filtered tap water and consumers can easily fill reusable bottles with their own regular or home-filtered tap water, the amount of packaging used for bottled water seems way out of whack.

Toxics in packaging are also a major concern. Studies indicate that potentially hazardous substances such as phthalates and bisphenol-A (BPA) may leach from packaging under certain conditions, although manufacturers say these chemicals do not endanger consumers.

**Q:** What are the main types of green packaging innovations today?

**A:** Pressured by governments and consumers and forced by the weak economy to be more efficient, manufacturers have developed creative packaging approaches:

- **Size reduction.** With "lightweighting," they figure out ways to use less aluminum in a pop can, for example. Reductions may also be achieved by changing the product. If you use one of the new "2x" or "3x" ultra-concentrated laundry detergents, you can wash two times or three times the number of laundry loads as with the same amount of unconcentrated detergent.
- **Toxics reduction.** Microsoft and other companies have reduced or eliminated the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic packaging, which can be toxic in production and disposal. Concern is also growing about the BPA coating inside most food and beverage cans, so developing safer coatings may be the next big push.
- **Reusables and refillables.** Lunch meats and other foods now come in reusable containers perfect for leftovers. Refills in pouches have been introduced for liquid soaps in dispensers.

As recently as the early 1990s, the old Rainier brewery in Seattle washed and refilled beer bottles. Refilling of beer and pop bottles significantly reduces waste, but has nearly died out in the U.S. due to resistance from bottlers and retailers for logistical reasons.

- **Degradability.** The problem with biodegradable containers is that nothing breaks down in a landfill very quickly. Unless approved biodegradable containers or bags go to a composting facility, many solid-waste experts think these are not a viable solution to packaging waste.
- **Recyclability and recycled content.** More companies have made their containers recyclable, but you should confirm with your city what you can put in your recycling bin. Using packaging made from recycled materials is one of the greenest things a manufacturer can do. We're likely to see more recycled-content packaging on store shelves soon, especially plastic containers.

**Q:** What can a consumer do to fight packaging waste?

**A:** With praise and purchases, support efforts of manufacturers and retailers to green their packaging. Wal-Mart has led the way among retailers with its "packaging scorecard" for suppliers, but many other companies are joining in. Most important, simply avoid overpackaged products.

Packaging has its place, but it's not the garbage can.

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