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Overpackaged products impede waste reduction

Of the three environmental R's — Reducing, Reusing and Recycling — reducing the amount of material we use is the most effective way to conserve our resources and improve environmental quality.

One large portion of our solid waste is product packaging. Fifteen percent of our garbage comes from the packaging that is sold with the products we buy; another 15 percent comes from presale packaging and shipping.

Packaging is obviously useful. It protects our food from harmful bacteria and prevents spoiling. Packaging also decreases damage during transport and helps distributors efficiently deliver their wares from factories to stores.

Unfortunately, most products are packaged in long-lasting plastic. "The trouble with plastics is that they are put to all sorts of uses for which they are actually quite inappropriate," writes conservationist John Seymour. "We use plastics, which are long-lasting materials, to make objects that we promptly throw away."

Plastics exact a higher environmental cost than other materials, such as cardboard. A study conducted by the Tell Us Institute calculated the hidden costs of producing and disposing of packaging — air pollution, water pollution, chemical spills and emissions, lung disease, landfill costs, etc.

According to the study, the environmental and human health costs of PVC plastic are $5,053 per ton, whereas the hidden costs for paperboard are only $330 per ton. Although the exact amount of these figures is disputed by some, it is clear that we pay a lot more than we think for plastic packaging.

Designed for "convenience," one-serving packages are often the most overpackaged food products. For example, StarKist's Charlie's Lunch Kit contains a 3¼ ounce can of tuna in water — 2¼ oz. after draining the water — two foil packets of mayonnaise, six crackers wrapped in plastic; one foil packet of relish and a wooden spoon. This kit comes enclosed in a plastic container that is then surrounded by plastic wrap. After you eat the four ounces of food, you end up throwing away two ounces of packaging.

Hannah Holmes, associate editor of Garbage magazine, cites another example — Betty Crocker's Dunkaroos cookies. "Inside the cardboard, box you'll find six plastic trays, each sealed with a plastic/foil lid. Tiny cookies rattle around; each tray also holds a ½ ounce blop of slimy icing; the more or less digestible material in the box totals just six ounces, and comes to you in 2.3 ounces of packaging.... The real sin of the packaging is that it disguises the fact you're paying almost $6 a pound for these cookies."

These meals containing "polymer garnishings" are wasteful both environmentally and economically.

Some companies are working to get rid of overpackaged items. By reducing the thickness of the plastic bags used inside cereal boxes by 12 percent, General Mills is able to save 500,000 pounds of plastic a year. Sears saves about 78 tons of plastic each year by selling its screwdrivers and pliers without plastic containers. Procter & Gamble removed the carton in which their deodorants are packaged, which now saves 3.4 million pounds of paperboard per year.

Laundry detergent manufacturers have introduced concentrated soaps in small packages that can be reconstituted in empty detergent bottles. Also available are concentrated "Ultras," which can wash a load of laundry just as effectively but use a smaller amount of detergent. These new products reduce packing material by about 11 percent.

Acceptance of these economical and environmentally smart detergent packages has been slow. "The notion that bigger is better has been so ingrained that it's a challenge to market products in a smaller package," said Procter & Gamble spokeswoman Lynn Hailey.

As consumers, we determine the market for overpackaged items. If we refuse to purchase such items, they will not be produced and sold — especially if we tell our retailers that we refuse to purchase excessively packaged products. Purchasing sparsely packaged items also sends an effective message to manufacturers.

Recycling and reusing are important, but we must reduce the amount of material we discard at the source if we are to effectively control our solid waste stream.

For more information on how to reduce the amount of solid waste your household generates, write to: Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Solid Waste Management Program, PO Box 176, Jefferson City, Mo., 65102; or call 1-751-5401. Information is also available from the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Solid Waste, 401 M St. S.W., Washington, D.C., 20460.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.