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Stores think outside the bag

By Blanca Torres
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Mikki Broughton walked out of a Safeway store in Walnut Creek on Tuesday with her groceries stuffed in plastic bags. She piled them into her backseat next to a tote bag from Trader Joe's.



Dan Rosenstrauch/Contra Costa Times

The debate over paper or plastic remains a fresh concern for consumers.

"I switch back and forth," the Concord woman said, referring to the tote bag she will reuse and the plastic bags she will recycle. "I'm a green person. I'm conscious about that issue, and I do what I can."

More shoppers are taking an eco-friendly stance similar to Broughton's. Increased awareness of environmental issues and corporate responsibility is putting retailers under more pressure to integrate greener living into their practices and overall brand.

"The consumer is telling us they are sensitive to this issue, at least some of them," said Claire Rosenzweig, president of the Promotion Marketing Association, a trade group for consumer goods and retailers. "Just like with any marketing plan, there is the overall goal of what the brand wants to achieve. If the issue of eco-sensitivity is important to retailers, then they might consider doing things that might address that."

A major concern is shopping bags. Putting a recycling bin near a store entrance is not enough to make a difference, experts said.

"A store that cares about their brand is going to pay attention to every detail, every touchpoint a customer has with them, including the (shopping) bag," said Gary Szenderski, a branding expert and consultant with the Truth Agency, a Santa Ana-based firm. "The really smart retailers recognize that the whole green movement is pretty darn pervasive right now."

Paper vs. plastic

The debate over paper versus plastic goes back decades, and there still is no clear consensus on which is less harmful to the environment, said Nicole Callahan of the Environmental Literacy Council, a Washington D.C.-based advocacy group.

"There's different types of tradeoffs," she said. "Some consumers are much more concerned about different aspects of environmentalism."

Some controversy involving plastic bags are that they are made from petroleum-based products, which is a finite resource, and the number of bags that are actually recycled. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans throw away about 100 billion plastic bags a year and that less than 1 percent are recycled.

Paper bags are biodegradable, but they often end up in landfills where they do not break down. On the other hand, plastic bags do not biodegrade but take up less space in landfills.

And while most grocery stores stock reusable bags made of canvas or some other sturdy material, shoppers overwhelming prefer the disposable kind.

The question is, whose responsibility is it to reduce waste from bags: the consumer, retailer or both?

The city of San Francisco asked retailers to reduce the amount of plastic bags they gave away by 10 million in 2006. The success of the program has been difficult to track and confirm, leading the city to propose an outright ban.

Sweden-based Ikea, a global chain of furniture and housewares, announced last month plans to charge 5 cents for plastic bags starting later this month. At the same time, Ikea will drop the price of the reusable bags it sells to 59 cents from 99 cents.

The company said the move is a way to "take a stand" against pollution caused by plastic bags and that it will use the money to support a tree preservation fund.

"The initiative makes customers think of Ikea as a company that cares about the environment," said Nicholas Aparicio, creative director for Landor and Associates in San Francisco, a branding and design firm.

Brand values

The concept of communicating brand values via shopping bags is not new.

Retailers such as Tiffany, with its signature blue packages, transmit the idea of luxury, while other retailers, such as the Apple Store, give out simple white bags that can be worn as backpacks that say innovation and high technology.

"There's a sense of accomplishment when you purchase something at a particular retailer," Aparicio said. "People want others to know. ... And so then, they serve as a walking billboard for the retailer."

Similarly, people want to walk out of a grocery store feeling good about the bags they are using to bring their food home.

"Paper bags are easier to reuse for things like the kids' school projects," said Ruth Craver of Walnut Creek. "Reusable bags would be better, but I'm not very good about planning ahead."

Diane Hayden of Walnut Creek buys "Green Bags" from Whole Foods for 99 cents each and said it takes her an "extra two minutes" to remember to pack them in her trunk for the next shopping trip.

"Once you pay for the bag, everything changes," said Robert Batement, president of Roplast Industries, an Oroville company that makes reusable plastic shopping bags. "If they are paying for them, they are not seen as disposable products and people are more aware of reusing them and getting the most use out of them."

The problem with most of the plastic bags used in stores is that they are flimsy and weak, he said, which means people can only pack so much in each bag or double bag.

Roplast makes bags that are made of plastic but can be used multiple times.

The company tries to sell retailers on a program called "Bags for Life," in which customers pay up to 50 cents for a bag from a retailer and then receive free replacement bags after that.

"What we're offering is very practical," Batement said. "But it does require people to change their behavior."

Blanca Torres covers retail and consumer issues. Reach her at 925-943-8263 or btorres@cctimes.com. Read her blog, Shop Talk, at cctextra.com/blogs/shoptalk.

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