



Excessive Packaging

The Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment

Introduction

Packaging ensures that people can buy and use products when they want them, in good condition and with little wastage. However, many people think there is too much of it.

Everybody has a view on what's excessive, but for an informed judgment people need to understand the decisions that packaging designers and packaging buyers have to make.

The least possible packaging does not necessarily mean the least possible environmental impact. Below we give some examples of grocery products where packaging extends shelf-life and reduces wastage.

But if you still think that a product seems to be excessively packaged, contact the retailer or manufacturer to complain, or call 08454 04 05 06 or go on-line to Consumer Direct at www.consumerdirect.gov.uk so that trading standards officials can investigate. Over-packaging is against the law. See the section on [Legislation - Packaging and Environment](#)

The functions of packaging

Packaging has to fulfill a number of functions. First and foremost, it must *ensure that the contents are delivered to the consumer or business end-user in good condition*, whatever stresses and strains it undergoes during transportation.

The packaging must *protect the contents from hazards* such as vibration, moisture, heat, odours, light penetration, micro-organisms or pest infestation, and if the product is a liquid, *the packaging must not leak*.

Packaging for household items must be *easy to open* (but *difficult to open accidentally*) and may have to be *resealable*. *Tamper-evidence* or *child-resistance* may also be a requirement. *Ovenable trays* will often be needed for ready-meals. Liquids must be easy to *pour without spillage*. Packaging must be as easy as possible to *carry*.

Packaging needs to *carry information* about the product, the company taking responsibility for it, and maybe instructions for handling or use. Some labeling such as the name of the food manufacturer is required by law. If the packaging does not have sufficient surface area for all the necessary information to be displayed, there may have to be an outer box so that a leaflet can be inserted.

Packaging for consumer goods must be attractive enough to encourage people to buy it. There is nothing more wasteful than a product which is never sold or used.

Packaging designers have to balance all these functional demands, whilst also ensuring that costs and environmental impacts are kept to a minimum.

Why add to nature's own packaging?

Cucumbers have their own protective skins, so why are they sometimes sold wrapped in plastic? The reason is that unwrapped cucumbers lose so much moisture that they become unsaleable after three days; just 1.5 grammes of plastic keeps them fresh for 14 days and untouched by dirty hands.

Shoppers can buy some items without any packaging, such as loose fruit and vegetables from market stalls. Supermarkets also offer customers the option of buying loose fruit and vegetables, which gives people the opportunity to buy the exact amount that they want. But produce is less likely to be spoiled and wasted if it has been prepacked, not only because the packaging protects it from handling damage, but also because the information printed on the pack helps stock rotation in the store and at home.

And goods sold loose still need packaging to get them from the grower to the shop or market stall, and have to be bagged up again for the checkout. People buying from a market stall would be unwise to put soft fruit into their shopping bag without wrapping it first.

Why are there sometimes several layers of packaging?

Multi-layer packaging, in chocolate boxes for instance, is sometimes the right choice because the *total* packaging needed is

minimised when each layer can do what it does best. Using different packaging materials in combination makes the best use of their specific properties – cardboard provides rigidity, aluminium foil protects against moisture and light, plastics are resistant to tearing, and so on.

Multipacks – an outer layer of cardboard or plastic holding several packs of beer, yoghurt or paper tissues together – combine the benefits of bulk packaging and small containers. They reduce handling time and therefore labour costs; they reduce queueing time at the checkout and they give consumers the convenience of smaller sizes, which is important where the contents have to be used up quickly once the pack has been opened. But multipacks do use more resources, and it is up to individual consumers to decide whether this trade-off is acceptable or whether they would prefer to buy single items.

Why are dishwasher tablets individually wrapped?

Dishwasher tablets were introduced because consumers tended to put a little bit too much detergent into their machines, which wasted detergent and added unnecessarily to water pollution. Tablets deliver a measured dose, but as they absorb water, they have to be individually wrapped to prevent them turning into a soggy mush at the bottom of the box if stored in a damp cupboard under the sink.

Why is there sometimes a lot of empty space in the pack?

Meat, fish, fruit and vegetables may seem to be in oversized packs if the MAP (Modified Atmosphere Packaging) process is used. MAP keeps the right gases in and the wrong ones out, so that products stay fresh for up to ten days rather than two or three. Without MAP, many products would need energy-intensive freezing or the addition of preservatives.

Powders and small items like sweets and breakfast cereals settle after filling. The packaging may look over-sized, and may even seem to be a deliberate attempt to deceive, but a smaller pack might result in product overflow and wastage, or in the case of sealed bags, product jamming the seal and causing the production line to stop. Slowing the line may be an answer, but that would add to production costs and to energy consumption.

Stocking can be an issue where the manufacturer's range consists of a number of products of slightly different sizes – pills, for instance. It may not be practicable to keep a wide range of boxes or jars of slightly different dimensions, especially if the filling machines have to be adjusted every time a production run involves containers of a different height.

Stocking is also an issue for mail-order and home delivery companies. If consignments of an unforeseeable number of items of different shapes and sizes have to be grouped together, the supplier cannot possibly be expected to ensure a snug fit every time. He/she is under a legal obligation to try, though. Several mail order companies have fallen foul of the law when they have flagrantly over-packaged some orders.

Do we need gift packaging?

Luxury products like chocolates and perfume are often attacked for being over-packaging because the packaging is more elaborate than is strictly necessary in order to protect the contents. However, if gifts aren't supplied already specially wrapped, the customer would gift-wrap them themselves, almost certainly adding more material than the manufacturer does. Much the same applies to Easter Eggs, where the packaging is an integral part of the product – if you just want chocolate, you can buy a chocolate bar.

Luxury and gift products tend to be bought infrequently, and account for only a small proportion of packaged goods purchases. Nevertheless, the manufacturers of these products still have to comply with the legal requirement to ensure that the weight and volume of the packaging are the minimum necessary for safety, hygiene and consumer acceptability, and packaging designers are using all their ingenuity to find ways of saving material without reducing the packaging's attractiveness.

Do we need this packaged product at all?

Snacks intended to be eaten on the move are an example of products where the consumer could easily assemble the components him/herself without the need for packaging. This is a question of consumer convenience and lifestyle choice.

Indeed, many packaging innovations are a direct response to social changes and consequent consumer demand:

- the growth in single-person households has meant increasing demand for smaller, more convenient portions;
- as more women now work outside the home than twenty or thirty years ago, there has been an increasing demand for food that is easier and quicker to prepare and cook.

Innovation

The packaged goods industry is highly competitive, and packaging manufacturers, packaged goods producers and retailers are

all under pressure to come up with new and better packaging solutions. No business wants to spend more on packaging than it has to and the fewer resources the packaging needs, the lower its cost.

That's why a one-litre washing-up liquid bottle uses 64% less material than in the 1970s, a 275g glass beer bottle 61% less, a 165g yoghurt pot 43% less, a two-litre plastic fizzy drink bottle 31% less and a 400g soup can 29% less. And last year, Easter Egg manufacturers reported that they had reduced the weight of their packaging by around 30% from the previous year's.

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