

Incredible Shrinking Packages



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Left, Coca-Cola's new and old 8-ounce bottles. Right, McDonald's Big Mac containers. The new package has been redesigned to use recycled cardboard, rather than styrofoam.

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Marketers usually boast about what they have added to their products. Increasingly, though, they are bragging about what they are taking out — by cutting down on packaging and its impact on the environment.

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Examples of packages that have been redesigned to use less or different material, while still holding the same amount of product.

◀ Coca Cola ▶



[Procter & Gamble](#), for example, has introduced rigid tubes for Crest toothpaste that can be shipped and displayed on shelves without boxes. Aveda, a beauty products company, is expected to soon roll out a men's care line that is packaged in bottles made of 95 percent recycled materials.

And [Coca-Cola](#) plans to cut the plastics in its Dasani water bottles by 7 percent over the next five years, just by tweaking the shape of the bottle and the cap.

"Waste of any kind is inefficiency, and inefficiency equals cost," said Scott Vitters, Coca-Cola's director of sustainable packaging.

The number of companies making such changes is growing sharply, as they try to reduce costs and address growing environmental concerns.

And their ranks are expected to grow even more, because of [Wal-Mart Stores](#). The world's largest retailer, known for pressuring vendors to lower their prices, has begun

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Wal-Mart.

In fact, many companies began tinkering with their packaging long before Wal-Mart entered the fray. They do not expect consumers to buy their products purely for the package — but they are hoping that “greener” packages will give them a competitive edge over similar products, even as they hold down costs.

And many companies that do not even distribute through Wal-Mart are also pushing to streamline packaging.

[Estée Lauder](#), for one, spent more than a year working with aluminum smelters to design tubes and caps made from 80 percent recycled aluminum. Much of the packaging of its holiday gift boxes is now made from recycled paper. And its Origins line is expected to soon ship only in folding cartons made with solar, wind or other clean energies.

Environmental groups are playing their part, too. Four years ago, Environmental Defense, which was instrumental in getting [McDonald's](#) to give up plastic foam clamshell packages in 1991, devised a calculator that enables package designers to compare the weight, recycled content and performance traits of about 20 materials.

Recently, the tool was adopted by GreenBlue, a nonprofit research institute that operates the Sustainable Packaging Coalition. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has given GreenBlue a grant of \$150,000 to further refine the tool.

“Packaging offers major opportunities for reducing energy use and greenhouse gases, and for saving the \$4 billion worth of materials that now ends up in landfills,” said Matt Hale, director of the agency’s Office of Solid Waste.

Environmentalists applaud Wal-Mart’s involvement, but they want more. Environmental Defense, for example, wants Wal-Mart to give greater weight to greenhouse gases emitted when the paper, plastic or other packaging material are made — and to methane emitted from landfills if the final package is dumped.

pushing its 66,000 vendors to get rid of excess packaging.

Wal-Mart has promised to become “packaging neutral” by 2025. That means that, through recycling, reusing or perhaps even composting, it will try to recover as much material as was used in the packaging that flows through its stores.

To reach that goal, it is enlisting the help of vendors to cut back on their packaging — for the products themselves and by using less shrink wrap or cardboard for shipping.

Wal-Mart introduced a “packaging scorecard” in February that lets vendors rate themselves on criteria like the ratio of package size to product and whether the package uses recycled material. The company may even pay more for products with better packaging, as long as it can recoup the money through recycling revenue or lowered disposal costs.

“The consumer will see the same price, we’ll just be getting some of our money at the back end,” said Matt Kistler, a senior vice president for Sam’s Club, a unit of

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“We want them to look harder at the greenhouse gases associated with the package’s entire life cycle,” said Gwen Ruta, director of corporate partnerships for Environmental Defense, which is working with Wal-Mart to upgrade the scorecard.

Many suppliers say they welcome the scrutiny from Wal-Mart. [Nestlé](#) Waters North America, which owns Poland Spring, Deer Park and other brands, said that it had saved 20 million pounds of paper in the last five years by using narrower labels on many bottles.

It recently switched to clear caps that are more easily recycled. And it is rolling out half-liter bottles that contain 12.5 grams of plastics, among the lightest water bottles around.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll score an A; let’s see if it translates into more business,” said Kim E. Jeffery, chief executive of Nestlé Waters, part of Nestlé.

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