



***PAPER VS. PLASTIC BAGS:
RECYCLE, REUSE, RETHINK***

By Robert Degnan
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The current controversy of paper vs. plastic bags at the checkout stand offers a curious set of comparisons, and puts a company such as ours in the middle of the sustainability debate. We design, manufacture and imprint certified compostable recyclable paper bags and have done so in Oregon for over 60 years.

With the advent and affordability of plastic in the 1950's, grocers and other retailers transitioned to this new, lightweight packaging alternative that was affordable, easy to store and leak-resistant. Even now, some of our customers sell products which require reusable and recyclable polyethylene and polypropylene bags. To meet their needs we source these from offshore vendors, although arbitrarily imposed import tariffs are beginning to impact our ability to meet this demand.

We are proud of the products we provide our customers in the agriculture, grocery, restaurant, bakery, deli and winery market segments. These loyal accounts have kept three generations of workers employed through the toughest of times – including now. Despite the current recession, our Canby-based manufacturing plant and regional sales offices have continuously employed 55-60 workers in family-wage jobs without layoffs and we have added a second shift when seasonal demands peak.

So, how do growers, retailers and consumers weigh the sustainable aspects of paper vs. plastic in a state with employment, economic AND environmental concerns? It appears everyone you talk with has valid arguments for one bag option or the other. But the debate over what material a bag is made of only scratches the surface of a much bigger picture: what happens to that paper or plastic bag once it has served its purpose – and, like a cat, can it have more than one life?

***Can we consider making
a single use bag a multi-use bag,
and once thoroughly used,
can we properly recycle our trash
without trashing Oregon in the process?***

That may sound odd coming from a bag manufacturer. After all, aren't we in the business to sell as many bags as possible? Sure...but more than this, what we advocate is looking at a bag as "more than a bag"...the possibilities are endless.

For example, bags can be billboards – serving to inform, educate, remind and/or brand a product or service. Eugene-based grocer Market of Choice features a shopping list form on the side of its grocery bag, turning their end-of-counter sack into a handy tool for jotting down needed items on the next trip to the store.

Several of our specialty produce bags are imprinted with recipes for the vegetables or fruits they hold. Customers can copy or clip the recipes once they're done with the bag, reducing the amount of waste. Bags can also promote worthy causes such as food drives while simultaneously serving as the means to repack and deliver donated food to the needy.

Bags can be gift wrap – creatively colored, painted, glued, tied and presented to a loved one. Who doesn't appreciate a brightly adorned bag holding anything from a small treasure to a large surprise? How often have you saved a colorful gift bag – paper or plastic – to be reused once again? Perhaps next time you find the need for a gift basket as a 'thank you' to a customer or friend, consider packing your appreciation in a gift bag!

Paper bags can be made into toys such as puppets or any number of other creative applications to charm the imagination of children and adults alike. Just ask any six-year-old what can be done with his or her lunch bag! An organic apple bag we recently produced for Disney featured a nutritional quiz and fun facts for kids alongside Winnie the Pooh.

What about the classic "brown bag lunch?" How often have you kept an interesting bag to reuse for packing a meal to go? Or, consider the possibilities of providing sturdy reusable paper or plastic bags to school cafeterias. This would allow children to sack up their leftover cookies or fruit for a nutritious afternoon snack following their 'time-crunched' lunch...and could reduce the amount of food thrown out daily in our school lunchrooms.

The current Oregon bill proposing a plastic bag ban calls on most retailers to eliminate all plastic bags at end-of-counter and charge consumers at least a nickel for a paper bag. Why not simply direct retailers to provide recycling bins for both types of bags, plus enact stiffer statewide fines for littering?

In fact, perhaps the best "reuse" of any bag would be as a litter bag, with paper bags used to clean up and recycle compostable garbage and plastic bags used to gather other plastic bags and dispose of them at designated collection sites. Certainly, we can agree there are ways to find sensible and cost-effective ways to recycle both paper and plastic to sustain our needs and our planet.

Our Oregon ancestors, from those who traveled in covered wagons across the Oregon Trail to our grandparents who struggled through the Great Depression, found ways to reuse just about everything they purchased. We have a reputation in this state for being resourceful and innovative, so let's continue to "Keep Oregon Green" economically AND environmentally, and put our energies into creative solutions to increase both jobs and livability for the future.

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