

Paper or plastic: A retail perspective

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



Paper or plastic? It's a daily choice we are given, but what do we choose? I'm sure it's no surprise to hear that four of

every five bags handed out at grocery stores now are plastic, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. One hardly can get through an afternoon of shopping without coming home with several plastic bags.

However, what do we do with them once we've used them? Sadly, few of us are recycling them. Reportedly, only 1 percent to 3 percent of plastic bags are recycled in Maui County, presenting a significant challenge in our landfills. Frustrations also run high as plastic bags litter the island, leading us to explore other "bagging" solutions and approaches to protect our environment.

People continue to debate the issue of paper versus plastic, and each side clearly has its pros and cons on a variety of levels. Often, how one views the benefits of either paper or plastic depends on how one views resource conservation and whether one's emphasis is rooted in more of a local or

a global perspective.

As we begin addressing this issue in Maui County, a California Retailers Association publication offers a few things to consider regarding frequently suggested alternatives:

Compostable/ biodegradable plastic

Pros:

- Customers believe they will compost.
- Perceived as the "only" type of plastic bag not harmful to the environment.

Cons:

- The bags really don't compost in the landfills unless exposed to sunlight, which doesn't happen once the next load is dumped on top of them.
- Lack of availability, as there are only a few compostable bag manufacturers and the raw materials for manufacturing are not easily acquired. (One manufacturer, Heritage Bag, said there is not enough raw material in the world to manufacture enough compostable/biodegradable plastic bags to supply San Francisco.)
- Second-most expensive bag for stores to purchase, after reusable bag — approximately 25 cents per bag, compared to 1 cent per recyclable plastic bag.
- For stores that decide to sell the compostable bags, customers may be resistant.

Paper bags

Pros:

- Readily available.
- Comparatively cheaper than compostable plastic and reusable bags, but more expensive than recyclable plastic bags.

Cons:

- Destroy forests.
- Not practical for wet weather.

- Not aware of availability of paper bags suitable for nongrocery, nondrug retailers.

- Take up more space in landfills than plastic bags.
- Require more in-store storage room in back and at point of sale.
- Takes seven trucks to deliver the same amount of paper bags as one truck of plastic bags — generating more gas usage, highway traffic and air pollution.

Recyclable plastic bags

Pros:

- Can be recycled and made into new products, such as children's outdoor play sets, patio decking, etc.
- Although not commonly understood, this is a great environmental option as the entire product can be used and reused.
- Reduces plastic litter.
- Bags are lightweight, convenient and reused for other purposes within the home, such as pet scooping, waste-basket liners and lunch bags.
- There is a market for the plastic.
- Preferable in recycle programs because compostable bags contaminate recycled bags if mixed, since the compostable ingredients (such as cornstarch) reduce the strength of the plastic.
- Strong enough to hold 25 pounds, but lightweight for consumers to carry.
- Water resistant.
- Take up one-seventh of the landfill space, release 94 percent less pollution during manufacturing, and 70 percent less air pollution during manufacture than paper bags.

Cons:

- Often perceived as the worst environmental option, however inaccurately.
- Disdain by legislators and some consumers.
- Uses oil to manufacture.
- Often tossed out and a significant source of the litter stream.

Reusable bags

Pros:

- Excellent store branding opportunities.
- Extensive customer marketing opportunities, such as free to those purchasing over X dollar amount, opening new accounts, etc.
- Charitable tie-in possibilities.
- Create least harm to environment.
- Reduce plastic litter.
- Reduce possibility that companies will need to change bagging options continually since there is no political downside to reusable bags.

Cons:

- Most expensive bag for stores to purchase.
- Most expensive bag for customers to purchase.
- Some customers will refuse to purchase them.
- Some customers will "forget" to bring them into the stores, and stores will need to have backups of plastic, compostable plastic or paper bags for customers who forget their reusable bags or do not want to purchase them.
- Depending on the bag, may not be suitable for wet weather.

While there are pluses and minuses on both sides of the paper-versus-plastic-versus-reusable-bag debate, what's the real answer? We'll explore that more next week in the second half of this article, where we further share ways to reduce plastic bags, protect the environment, educate the community, and change the public's plastic bag disposal behaviors.

■ *Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce. This is part one of a two-part series.*