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Bring Your Own Bag

Supermarket shoppers who are bringing their own reusable bags to reduce the use of paper and plastic may be an omen of things to come. Containers have a long history. Ancient cargo was transported in pots. Gunny sacks, wooden crates and barrels followed for many centuries. With the industrial revolution, paper and cardboard became the norm for distribution of goods, and beginning about 75 years ago, plastic was introduced to the shipping and packaging of goods. From ancient to modern times, packaging materials have been indispensable to transport agricultural and manufactured goods.

It was not until the Twentieth Century, however, that packaging materials evolved to products of convenience designed to save labor. Paper plates and cups eliminated the need to wash dishes in food service establishments and the home. Disposable products, such as facial tissue, paper towels, and diapers substituted for cloth to avoid laundering. Many disposable products were also developed to improve hygiene and became accepted on behalf of better health and convenience.

So far, the evolution towards disposable goods continues as quickly as new opportunities can be found to help consumers save steps and to protect against contamination.

Until late last century there was almost no recognition by consumers of a need to recycle paper packaging and disposables. And not until about 20 years ago was there much civic support from communities for recycling.

While slow to take off, the idea of recycling has awakened the nation to the need to reprocess and reuse materials that we dismiss from our minds when finished using them. For many who grew up with a regular habit of returning bottles to collect deposits, the emergence of recycling is not entirely new. For those old enough to have saved newspapers and collected tin foil for the World War II effort, the reemergence of recycling now, 50 years later, also represents a connection to the past.

Motivation for recycling is now more far-reaching because the planet and, more immediately, the environment that our children will live in is at stake. Efforts to recycle and to reuse now trigger resistance to using products that trade convenience for disposability. Declining use of grocery bags when shoppers bring their own bags to the store is a step towards this resistance. The inconvenience of having to remember to bring your own bag to the store is relatively small. Conservation in other areas can be expected to grow when the cost in time and effort to avoid the use of a product is small. Examples are:

- Paper and plastic plates, cups, and dinnerware, which duplicate dishware and silverware owned by almost every home
- Plastic water bottles, which can give way to tap water, bottled water coolers, and portable thermoses or canteens
- Ziploc plastic refrigerator bags, which can give way to refrigerator dishware or permanent plastic containers
- Paper towels and napkins, which can be replaced by washable cloth and linen
- Disposable aluminum baking pans, which can give way to cookware

Commerce can be expected to join in when it finds that consumers are willing to avoid excess containers and packaging materials.

If willingness to accept some inconvenience to protect the environment becomes a social norm, we will be readopting practices that were the norm for our grandparents. Favoring willingness to accept a loss of convenience is the increased amount of time now becoming available as people drive less and spend more time at home.

Who could believe that this retrofitting in our society could occur? Once shoppers bring their own bags to the supermarkets and households undertake to sort and deliver their waste to the recycling bin, this belief becomes not only plausible but a growing reality.

*For more information on studies underlying this report,
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