

Hitting the sack

Legislation and consumer demand are helping reusable bags carve out a home at the checkout counter.

BY RICHARD TURCSIK

Better add "reusable" to the familiar "paper or plastic?" refrain from cashiers. That's because whether made from paper, cotton, hemp, virgin plastic or recycled soda bottles, reusable bags are the latest rage at the supermarket checkout counter.

"The reusable bag has kind of become the poster child for the green movement," says Sharon Feldman-Rowe, CEO and founder of EcoBags.com, a reusable bag company based in Ossining, N.Y. "Purchasing a reusable bag is really a first step and, just like changing your light bulbs or taking your leaves, it is one step out the door towards

reducing the waste you create and just being conscientious. It may actually improve your life considerably."

For retailers, reusable bags can significantly improve the bottom line. Most retail for at least \$1.00, with some of the fancier ones retailing for upwards of \$10. There are other benefits too. Reusable bags can be used hundreds, if not thousands of times, Rowe says some of her cloth bags have been used by consumers for 15 years. "That means we have to continually reach out for new customers," she says.

Reusable bags help promote the store since shoppers will likely use them for other errands, including shopping trips to competing stores. Another benefit is that by using them, shoppers are reducing the proliferation of disposable plastic bags. Those often end up sully the store's name in the waste stream, getting washed down sewers or tangled up in trees.

"Our graphics are a little cutting edge compared to most things that are out there," says Eliot Goldwang, president of 4RPlanet

Bag, based in Westmount, Quebec, Canada. "We are completely customizable and can do absolutely any graphics," Goldwang says his bags, made from woven polypropylene, offer superior tensile strength and are made with more comfortable 1.5-inch handles and shoulder straps.

"Offering a reusable bag program shows that the retailer is totally socially responsible," says Sheldon Caplan, sales manager at Envi Reusable Bags, a St. Laurent, Montreal, Quebec-based manufacturer of bags made from recycled PET soda bottles and other materials. "By being socially responsible it shows that not only are they taking an interest in the environment, but they are trying to educate the consumer also. The less plastic we use the better off we're going to be."

Initially championed by Whole Foods and other natural foods retailers, reusable bags have gone mainstream. One of the biggest proponents has been Montvale, N.J.-based A&P, which has been promoting them in its family of stores since October 2006. A portion of each bag sold at A&P benefits the

Elizabeth Harb Foundation (EHF), an organization committed to enforcing environmental laws on a global level. "A&P's EHF bag campaign not only offers an environmentally friendly bag, but also gives customers an opportunity to contribute to a worthy organization," says Lauren La Bruina, senior director, public relations and community affairs.

A&P designed its bags to stand out, but also be easily used for other purposes. Retailing for 99-cents, they are accented with vibrant colored flowers, exotic birds and seashells. "These fashionable bags aren't limited to carrying groceries, as they are sturdy enough to carry books, be used as a beach bag and more," says La Bruina. "We have received an overwhelmingly positive response from our customers regarding the Harb bag collection and our in-store program of reimbursing customers."

A&P continues to build upon the program, extending it to Pathmark when it acquired that chain and introducing a line of reusable lunch bags in February. "This new line of reusable lunch bags features vibrant colors and clever 'mealtime' expressions," La Bruina says. Offered at two bags for \$3, they are being merchandised in the dairy aisle of the company's A&P, The Food Emporium, Pathmark, Super Fresh and Waldbaum's stores.

BAGGING COMPETITION

A&P's Manhattan rival, D'Agostino Supermarkets, rolled out a collectible reusable version of its iconic D'Ag Bag in 2007 that was designed by Sean Beyer, a student at Nassau Community College, winner of a design competition created by the store. The event was so successful that it is being held again this year. According to a company spokeswoman, entire college classes have entered this year's competition. It is being promoted via posters in D'Agostino stores and on college campuses and online through Facebook and Twitter.

"At D'Agostino you can request paper, plastic and now we're asking the students of the metropolitan area to create our new bag that you can bring with you each time you shop," says Nick D'Agostino III, COO of the Larchmont, N.Y.-based chain. "By honoring our students and our environment we're giving something back to our city."

With their extensive reusable bag programs,

A&P and D'Agostino's may be getting a leg up on the competition. If New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has his way shoppers will soon be paying a 6-cent fee for every plastic bag they use. If the plan is implemented, 5 cents of the fee would revert to city coffers, while the store owner would get a penny as an incentive to comply.

It's a pretty hefty charge, but New Yorkers are getting off easy compared to folks in San Francisco. That city has banned plastic bags from supermarkets and other large stores completely. That has caused Albany, Calif.-based Andronico's, which operates a store in the city, along with Safeway and Lucky Stores, to switch back to paper. Bins under the checkout counters are now stocked with various sizes of paper bags, like supermarket checkouts were across the country in the days of yore.

"We don't have plastic bags in the store," says Bill Andronico, Andronico's president and CEO. "San Francisco doesn't allow it for stores of our size and frankly we're going away from plastic anyway. That and, in this store and one other store [in Marin County] we voluntarily dropped plastic because of 'green' awareness. And in our Berkeley stores the shift is much, much more to paper. And we use 100% recycled paper with 60% post-consumer." □

A new rePETe

CHICO, CALIF.-BASED CHICOBAG HAS INTRODUCED REPETE, a reusable bag made entirely of recycled materials researched and selected by ChicoBag to have the utmost durability and effect on reducing waste. The fabric and drawstring in the imported bags are produced from recycled plastic bottles (PET), averaging seven bottles per bag; the cordlock is made from recycled polyurethane; and the handy carabiner clip is made from recycled aluminum.

The bags are machine washable and in addition to a grocery shopping bag are ideal for use as a gym bag, book bag, hiking bag and trick-or-treating bag.

"Many companies claim to manufacture 'recycled' reusable bags and for this reason the people at ChicoBag feel it is our responsibility to let our customers know exactly what raw materials are used in rePETe production," says Wesley McMahon, marketing manager. "rePETe is manufactured from 99% recycled materials, with 73% of the total weight coming from post consumer recycled materials."

For more information, visit www.chicobag.com.

In the bag

REUSABLE BAGS ARE MADE FROM A WIDE VARIETY OF SOURCES. Here are some of the most popular:

Paper: The original bag is staging quite a comeback as communities across the country institute bans on its plastic counterparts. Many supermarkets now use paper bags with handles that are frequently reused by consumers.

PET: Often made from recycled plastic soda and water bottles that are shredded and then spun into yarn that is woven into fabric. Because of North American labor costs, most are made in Asia from Asian bottles.

Polypropylene: A non-woven fabric made out of plastics that are melted and woven into rolls, most polypropylene bags are made from a combination of recycled post-industrial and virgin materials. The bags are renowned for their strength and can be recycled.

Cloth: Can be made from a variety of sources, including natural cotton, organic cotton, hemp and recycled cotton. The bags are durable, long-lasting and machine washable.

