

What a waste



'IT WAS WAY OVER THE TOP'

Janice Forshaw 50, housewife

Janice ordered 10 dinner plates from Debenhams online, expecting they would be delivered in one or two boxes.

She was astonished to receive 10 separate boxes, which were much larger than the single plate each contained. She said: 'It was way over the top.'

Debenhams said it had to balance protection of the product with the need to cut down on packaging.

But the company admitted that it was surprised at the level of packaging and would try to ensure that a similar incident did not happen again.

We investigate what is being done to cut down on the packaging that ends up in your bin

Three out of four people in Britain believe that the food they buy has too much packaging on it, according to a Which? investigation.

Every year we throw out 10m tonnes of used packaging, half of this from food, and much of it goes straight to landfill.

Producing it wastes resources and creates greenhouse gases, while dumping it uses up landfill space. The Environment Agency estimates that landfill in London and East Anglia could run out by the end of the decade unless waste is cut significantly.

And we could feel the effect in our own pockets, too. Councils will face fines if they don't reduce the amount they send to landfill, and this could be passed on to us in the form of higher council tax.

Our findings

We spoke to Which? members, supermarkets and experts and carried out our own investigation. We found that:

- shops and manufacturers need to do much more to tackle the problem
- consumers are frustrated by overpackaging, but many admit it does not influence whether they buy a product
- laws to stop overpackaging are weak and difficult to enforce, leaving officials powerless to crack down on the problem.



This toy train could have come in a box half the size, our expert said

Which? members gave us examples of overpackaging that included shrink-wrapped peppers and a memory card for a digital camera that came in a large cardboard box, delivered by truck. The memory card was the size of a postage stamp.

In the supermarket

We also went shopping with David Hedger, a trading standards expert on packaging. Here's what we found.

■ One-size-fits-all packaging

David showed us goods in containers that were too big for them. For example, a pack of dried fruit, nuts and seeds was just two-thirds full.

■ Needless packaging

Four M&S Royal Gala apples were displayed on a tray in plastic next to the same apples in a plastic bag and other varieties sold loose. David's response? 'It's hard to understand the need for a tray like this, when they are being sold alongside the same apples with much less packaging.'

■ Presentation and marketing

David explained that sometimes the reason for the amount of packaging might be to do with presentation and marketing rather than simply protecting the food. For example, a Tesco Light Choices pizza came wrapped in plastic on a tray in a cardboard box. A similar size Tesco Value pizza came without the box. A cake in the shape of Homer Simpson took up just two thirds of its box.

What the law says

There are laws against excessive packaging, and it might seem that some examples we found could fall into this category. However, they don't necessarily break the law.

If a company can show trading standards that changing packaging would damage sales or that the public prefers the design, it can avoid prosecution. No supermarket has

ARE THERE ENOUGH RECYCLING FACILITIES?

Even if industry reduces packaging and uses more recyclable plastic, it's likely that a lot will still go to landfill.

That's because many local councils can recycle only paper, glass and metal, and, because of a lack of processing facilities, a few types of plastic.

More complex plastics are shipped to China, but,

because of that economy's development, this scheme could end.



Meanwhile, aluminium is in demand, but only half of all drink cans are recycled because of a lack of organisation in collecting them.

M&S has a plan to make all of its packaging easily compostable or recyclable. It said that 70% can currently be recycled, but this could be increased by 17% if the right facilities were available.



A half shoulder of lamb took up just 60% of space in its plastic box



We throw out 1.3 million unopened yogurt drinks and pots each year

been prosecuted for excessive packaging. There have been just four prosecutions of any kind in this area in eight years.

The government-appointed Sustainable Development Commission believes the weakness of the law and the slow pace of change lets supermarkets continue to overpackage products, passing the burden of recycling and waste on to the public and to councils. It has called for a national packaging strategy to set ambitious targets for dealing with the waste.

What is being done?

The government and industry have launched initiatives to reduce packaging and increase recycling. But even if targets are met, it will take until 2020 to halve the waste going to landfill.

Industry, including supermarkets, claims it is doing all it can to reduce packaging and increase recycling. By law, manufacturers have to increase their use of recyclable materials to meet national targets. And supermarkets, other big companies and the government have signed the Courtauld

Commitment. This commits them to begin reducing total packaging waste by 2010.

Industry argues that packaging often saves more waste than it produces. A shrink-wrapped cucumber, for example, will remain saleable for 14 days. Without wrapping, that figure drops to three days.

Our role

Modern lifestyles and the way we shop have a huge effect on the packaging we use. We throw out a third of the food we buy, for example, much of it still in its containers. Local markets use less packaging than supermarkets, where most of us shop. And as consumers, we may need to change our attitudes: our survey showed that, despite our concerns about overpackaging, nearly half of us said it didn't influence what we buy.

OUR RESEARCH

As part of our research, we interviewed 1,006 adults representative of the population of Britain in May 2008.

Back to the future

Lessons from the past could point the way to the future

In the past, shoppers used to use refillable containers for many products. Unpackaged, a shop in north London, has a modern take on this. It sells virtually no packaged goods and encourages customers to buy or bring reusable containers and also to buy the exact amount they want. Products include those you might expect, such as pasta, coffee and rice, but also household cleaners in big dispensers. Owner Catherine Conway (pictured right) said that 80% of regular customers use refillable containers.



Checklist

Here are some tips on how to reduce the amount of packaging that you buy

■ **Think before you buy** Could you buy the same product with less or better packaging?

■ **Buy packaging that's recyclable in your area** To find out what can be recycled, see www.recyclenow.com or www.recyclemore.co.uk or ask your local council.

■ **Change the way you buy** Could you buy in bulk, buy loose fruit and vegetables, or use refillable packaging?

■ **Complain** If you think packaging is excessive, complain to the supermarket or manufacturer, or report it to trading standards at www.consumerdirect.gov.uk.



SUPERMARKET PLEDGES

Supermarkets have been urged to do more to tackle packaging. But what have they done and what have they pledged to do?

Asda

- Will reduce own-label packaging by 25% by end of 2008.
- Will reduce ready-meal sleeves by 32% (sleeves replaced by a smaller design or removed).
- Will send zero waste to landfill by 2010 from its stores.

M&S

- Will reduce non-glass packaging by 25% by 2012.
- Will ensure packaging can be easily recycled or composted by 2012.

Morrisons

- Has recycled 72% of store waste.
- Will use 15% less own-brand packaging by 2010.
- Will save 72,000 tonnes by reusing transit packaging.

Sainsbury's

- 35% of its fresh fruit and

vegetable packaging is recyclable.

- Removed plastic trays from fresh herbs, saving 50,000kg a year.
- Aims to make all ready-meal packaging 100% compostable.

Tesco

- Gives carbon footprint of individual products.
- Will reduce packaging on own-label and branded goods by 25% by 2010.
- Will import wine in bulk and bottle it here.

Waitrose

- Sold own-label Easter eggs in recycled and recyclable packaging for the first time this year.
- Sells own-label sandwiches in cardboard packs.
- Will recycle 75% of waste from stores by end of 2012.