

Paper Bags, The Natural Choice

The Facts

There is increasing concern about the over-use of plastic bags and particularly their contribution to marine litter. EU countries have acted by introducing bans, charges and other initiatives to limit their use. Whilst a general reduction in unnecessary packaging will be a valuable contribution to a circular and less wasteful economy, paper bags, because of their natural and renewable attributes, present an attractive and practical alternative. Studies show that they can be the natural and environmental alternative to plastic and textile bags.

Society is concerned about the overconsumption of plastic

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the impact that single-use packaging, particularly plastic, has on the environment. There are concerns that relatively little plastic packaging is recycled with a 37.6% EU average in 2020.[1] When discarded irresponsibly, plastics are a significant contributor to marine pollution. Over 14 million tons of plastic waste end up in the ocean annually, and plastic makes up 80% of all marine debris found from surface waters to deep-sea sediments.[2]

In the deepest point of the ocean, the Mariana Trench which extended 10,975 meters (36,000 ft) down in the Pacific Ocean, a plastic bag was found. Of the identifiable debris logged in the database, plastic was the most rampant, and plastic bags in particular made up the greatest source of plastic trash. This highlights just how deep an impact plastic pollution has become.[3]

> *"The main source of ocean plastic pollution is land-based - 80% of plastic in the ocean originates on land."*
>
> WWF, How Does Plastic End Up In The Ocean

EU countries must drastically reduce consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags

In 2015, the EU introduced legislation targeting plastic bags, with one of the aims being to reduce the average consumption of bags per person, from around 200 per year, to 90 by the end of 2019 and 40 bags per person by 2025.[4]

Many EU countries have adopted various measures to try to reduce consumption, including partial bans in France and Belgium (and proposed for Austria), mandatory charges in Denmark, Estonia, Netherlands, Spain and the UK and voluntary commitments in Germany and Finland.[5]

These measures have encouraged consumers to reuse their shopping bags and some retailers to seek alternatives to traditional, non-biodegradable plastic.

Paper bags can be an attractive alternative

The raw material for paper bags, wood, is a renewable and sustainable resource. Between 2005 and 2020, European forests grew by an area the size of Switzerland, the equivalent of 1,500 football pitches every day.[6]

The recycling rate for paper-based packaging in the EU is 83%.[1] Even if a paper bag is irresponsibly discarded, due to its natural compostable characteristics it will have a relatively low impact. Contrary to popular belief, paper bags can be very robust. Kraft paper is especially developed for demanding packaging. Due to its long and strong virgin fibres, it has a high level of mechanical strength. The choice of glue and a proficient construction of the handles add even more to the bag's strength and durability.[7]

Paper bags are manufactured from a wide variety of fibre types dependent on what they are being designed to carry. Paper bags made of recycled or, a hybrid of new and recycled fibre are a cost efficient option for non-food packaging application required to carry less weight e.g. shoe or textiles/ clothing.

The natural attributes of paper also resonate with consumers. According to consumer research conducted by Two Sides[8] in 2023, 55% of European consumers prefer paper-based packaging because it is better for the environment, 76% like it because it is home compostable and 49% prefer it for being easier to recycle.

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> *"Paper is very tactile due to its texture and shape. Its outstanding print quality and colour reproduction allow for great creativity in advertising and development of the brand image."*
>
> www.thepaperbag.org

How paper bags compare environmentally

Making reliable comparisons of the environmental impacts of different types of shopping bags can be complicated. Various organisations have undertaken Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs), which provide useful insights, but it needs to be remembered that the results are influenced by the scope of what is included, data quality, any assumptions made and the methodology.

In 2021, UK Supermarket Morrisons, brought paper bags back, saving 1,300 tonnes of plastic a year and their research has revealed that their virgin-fibre paper bags and the plastic bags they're replacing have an equivalent carbon footprint. Also, at their end of life, their paper bags will have a much higher chance of being recycled; being placed in curbside paper recycling.

> *"Our customers have told us that reducing plastic is their number one environmental concern so introducing the paper bag across the nation will provide another way of reducing the plastic in their lives."*
>
> Andy Atkinson, Group Customer and Marketing Director, at Morrisons[9]

The Two Sides 2023 Trend Tracker reveals that consumers prefer paper shopping bags for attributes such as compostable (64%), recyclable (55%) and made with renewable materials (38%).[8]

While textile bags, such as those made from cotton, are undoubtedly robust, research suggests that they need to be reused at least 50 times to achieve the same climate change performance as paper.[10]

Comparisons to other heavier materials, such as those used in fashion retail or supermarket 'bags for life', suggest that paper bags can be comparable or even better than plastic alternatives in terms of carbon footprint.[10]

Of course, less overall consumption is highly necessary for society to meet the global climate challenges and the reuse of all types of bags, whatever their construction, is to be strongly encouraged.

> *"For all carrier bags, reuse as many times as possible before disposal is strongly encouraged."*
>
> The Danish Environmental Protection Agency[10]

It can be concluded that paper bags, easily reused and recycled, and made with wood from sustainably managed forests, are the natural choice for consumers and retailers.

Sources

1. Eurostat, Recycling rate of packaging waste by type of packaging (EU27), 2021
2. International Union for Conservation of Nature, Marine Plastic Pollution, 2021
3. National Geographic, Plastic Bag Found At The Bottom Of The World's Deepest Ocean Trench, 2022
4. DIRECTIVE (EU) 2015/720
5. The Paper Bag, The Bag That Is Compliant, accessed September 2023
6. Two Sides analysis of FAO data, 2020
7. The Paper Bag, The Bag That Carries Anything, accessed September 2023
8. Two Sides Trend Tracker 2023, European Findings
9. Morrisons Corporate, Morrisons To Introduce Paper Carrier Bags In All Stores, accessed September 2023
10. The Danish Environmental Protection Agency, Life Cycle Assessment of grocery carrier bags, 2018

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