Fact Sheet: Packaging Waste Management

Introduction
Packaging is an integral part of any business, including retailers, food service providers, and general merchandisers. Its many benefits include:

- Product protection
- Displaying product information
- Product marketing
- Efficient product storage
- Efficient product transport

Examples of packaging materials include: cardboard, boxboard, paper, stretch wrap, glass, bubble wrap, plastic containers, steel and aluminum cans, wooden crates, pallets and spools.

The unfortunate drawback to packaging materials is the impact they can have on the environment. According to the U.S. EPA, container and packaging materials represented the largest portion of the Municipal Solid Waste Stream (MSW) at 31%.

By utilizing more energy-efficient technologies and adapting some simple conservation techniques, small businesses can reduce their impact on the environment while also saving money. Additional benefits to adapting these “green” business practices include, improving public image and leveraging new marketing opportunities.

The following information on packaging waste management includes tips on reducing, reusing, and recycling these materials.

Packaging Material Reduction
The most effective method of dealing with packaging waste is to reduce or eliminate its usage. This can also assist in lowering your costs associated with the purchase and disposal of these materials. The six principle methods of reducing packaging waste listed below center around analyzing what current packaging uses and determining what is essential and what is not.

1. Eliminate
   - Determine if packaging can be eliminated. The best packaging is no packaging, providing customer safety and satisfaction are not compromised.
   - Eliminate non-essential components of packaging, such as individually wrapped parts and products.
   - Replace pallet wrap with rubber bands or some other reusable item to hold shipments onto pallets.

2. Reduce Weight or Thickness
   - Consider switching to a lighter material for packaging (i.e. cardboard crates instead of wood)

What are Green Business Practices?
Green business practices center around improvements in energy conservation; waste reduction and recycling; water conservation; pollution prevention; and transportation related impacts. Increasingly, numbers of Fortune 500 firms are scrutinizing their businesses in reference to these green business practices. Some are motivated by societal responsibility, but all recognize the direct economic benefits.

Small businesses can achieve the same benefits as larger Fortune 500 firms, but often lack the necessary resources to do so. Time, expertise, or knowledge of where to turn for technical assistance is often a challenge. Even though small businesses may be constrained in the current economic climate, this “disruption” creates a more receptive attitude toward new ideas, particularly those with measurable dividends. Small businesses that engage in green business practices often experience 10% to 20% reductions in operating costs. Realizing these benefits, however, requires increased awareness and technical knowledge of green business practices.

Green business practices lead firms to a better work environment; a healthier workforce; more customers; and an increase in the bottom line.

- City of Spokane SMART Recognition Program
3. **Buy in Bulk**
   - Ship in bulk, or refillable containers, as much as possible, reducing the amount of packaging needed to ship.
   - Work with your suppliers on shipping materials in bulk to your company, reducing the amount of incoming packaging.

4. **Replace Single Use with Multi-Use**
   - Purchase packaging that can be used multiple times, such as reusable pallets, rather than packaging that is used once and discarded.

5. **Purchase for Long Life**
   - Rather than opting for cheaper packaging materials that typically have shorter life spans, choose more expensive packaging with a longer life span. The longer packaging lasts the fewer times it needs to be replaced.

6. **Transform Waste into a Product**
   - Rather than throwing out used boxes or Styrofoam, consider selling or donating them to another company.

---

**Packaging Material Reuse**

Reusing packaging materials is directly correlated with many of the reduction methods discussed above. Both assist in lowering your costs associated with the purchase and disposal of packaging materials. Below are some suggestions on implementing reuse in your business' packaging practices.

- Return containers to suppliers for reuse.
- Encourage suppliers to send products in reusable containers.
- Set up a collection area or bin for reusable packaging materials (i.e. Styrofoam peanuts, etc.).
- Use the boxes your suppliers' products arrive in to ship your products.
- Donate or sell used cartons to companies that are seeking alternatives to buying them new.
- Explore other donation opportunities for old packaging materials (i.e. school or daycare programs that use them for arts and crafts.)

---

**Packaging Material Recycling**

Once reduction and reuse methods have been exhausted for old packaging materials, recycling is the next best method. Many common packaging materials are recyclable. Below is a table of packaging materials and what percentage of the total packaging waste stream they constitute.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper &amp; Paperboard</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastics</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel &amp; Aluminum</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recycling packaging materials not only reduces waste sent to landfills, it can also save money by reducing disposal costs. Below are a few pointers for recycling packaging materials.

- Encourage suppliers to use materials which are made of recycled material.
- If current packaging is not recyclable, see if you can replace it with a recyclable material.
- Determine if materials are suitable for recycling.
  - Consider the impacts of additives, inks, labels and tear tape may impact recyclability.
- Establish a deposit or return program for your packaging with your customers.

25% of the energy used to manufacture cardboard is saved when cardboard is recycled.

---

**Collection Program**

Once materials have been identified as either reusable or recyclable, the next phase is to ensure that these materials are separated from the business' normal waste stream. Follow the list of procedures below.

1. **Set up bins and bags** for specific recyclables so that they can easily be separated from the business' standard waste stream.
2. **Properly label containers** to assist employees and customers in effectively separating recyclables from waste.
3. **Locate containers** near areas in your business where recyclable materials are generated and handled.
4. **Monitor your collection program** to make sure that waste and recyclables are being separated properly and that everyone is participating.

---

**National Energy Conservation Partners and Resources**

- Eco-Efficiency Centre – [www.eco-efficiency.dal.ca](http://www.eco-efficiency.dal.ca)
- ENERGY STAR – [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

**Local Energy Conservation Partners and Resources**

- Avista Utilities – [www.avistautilities.com](http://www.avistautilities.com)
- SMART Business Recognition Program - [www.developingspokane.org/incentives/green_incentive](http://www.developingspokane.org/incentives/green_incentive)
- Spokane Neighborhood Economic Development Alliance SNEDA – [www.sneda.org](http://www.sneda.org)
- Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs (SNAP) – [www.snapwa.org](http://www.snapwa.org)
- Spokane Transit Authority – [www.spokanetransit.com](http://www.spokanetransit.com)
- Sustainable Local Investment Partnership (SLIP) – Jim Wavada (509) 358-7894
- Waste Reduction Assistance Program (WRAP) – [www.solidwaste.org](http://www.solidwaste.org)
For more information, contact:
The Business Resource Center (BRC)
Eastern Washington University
668 N. Riverpoint Blvd.
Spokane, WA 99202-1660
Phone: (509) 358-2255
Fax: (509) 358-2267
Web site: www.ewu.edu/brc

Last updated May 4, 2009