

An Inconvenient Bag

The green giveaway of the moment -- the reusable shopping bag -- is a case study in how tricky it is to make products environmentally friendly.

By **ELLEN GAMERMAN**

It's manufactured in China, shipped thousands of miles overseas, made with plastic and could take years to decompose. It's also the hot "green" giveaway of the moment: the reusable shopping bag.

The bags usually are printed with environmental slogans as well as corporate logos and pitched as earth-friendly substitutes for the billions of disposable plastic bags that wind up in landfills every year. Home Depot distributed 500,000 free reusable shopping bags last April on Earth Day, and Wal-Mart gave away one million. One line of bags features tags that read, "Saving the World One Bag at a Time."

But well-meaning companies and consumers are finding that shopping bags, like biofuels, are another area where it's complicated to go green. "If you don't reuse them, you're actually worse off by taking one of them," says Bob Lilienfeld, author of the Use Less Stuff Report, an online newsletter about waste prevention. And because many of the bags are made from heavier material, they're also likely to sit longer in landfills than their thinner, disposable cousins, according to Ned Thomas, who heads the department of material science and engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Used as they were intended, the totes can be an environmental boon, vastly reducing the number of disposable bags that do wind up in landfills. If each bag is used multiple times -- at least once a week -- four or five reusable bags can replace 520 plastic bags a year, says Nick Sterling, research director at Natural Capitalism Solutions, a nonprofit focused on corporate sustainability issues.

Just as digital music downloads were the giveaway of choice last year, reusable shopping bags are the new "it" freebie. Earlier this month, Google handed out 525 nylon bags bearing the company's logo at its "Zeitgeist" conference, a meeting of business and political leaders held at its campus in Mountain View, Calif. The Sundance Institute gave out 12,000 fabric bags at its annual film festival earlier this year. Elisa Camahort Page, cofounder of BlogHer, an online community for women bloggers, says she even gave away 150 reusable bags to guests at her wedding last year.

Fueling the reusable-bag boom is the growing unpopularity of the ubiquitous throwaways known as T-shirt bags, so-called because the handles look like the top of a sleeveless T-shirt. An estimated 100 billion plastic bags are thrown away in the U.S. every year, according to the Worldwatch Institute.

Last year, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to ban the bags from supermarkets and chain drug stores, and this month, the city of Westport, Conn., banned most kinds of plastic bags at retail checkout counters. Boston, Baltimore and Portland, Ore., are also considering bans.

Earlier this year, Whole Foods Market grocery stores stopped using the T-shirt bags, and now offer paper bags or sell reusable totes priced at 99 cents to \$29.99. Next