

Opinions

Firm sails against tide of waste, indifference

If you consider the science and technology involved, the disposable plastic shopping bag is one of the marvels of the consumer age. It is light, resilient, impermeable, inert and strong enough to support a load 2,000 times its own weight.

These characteristics have made the plastic bag immensely popular with retailers and consumers. Since it was introduced almost 30 years ago, it has displaced almost every other form of packaging at cash registers around the world. According to some estimates, global consumption stands between 500 billion and a trillion bags annually, or about one million per minute.

Disposable plastic bags are also durable. Environmentalists estimate that a bag dropped as litter can take 500 to 1,000 years to deteriorate under the influence of climate.

These two factors – popularity and durability – have made plastic bags an environmental issue in many countries. Activists contend that as many as five billion of these things wind up as litter every year. They say that there are, on

Environmental concerns spark bio-degradable push

average, 46,000 pieces of plastic in each square mile of the oceans and that plastic kills 100,000 marine animals and birds yearly.

Activists have used such numbers to prod politicians into action in some 40 countries. One of the first to act was Denmark which, in 1994, began taxing retailers on the basis of the number of plastic and paper bags they handed out. Merchants passed on the charge to consumers, which led to a 66-per-cent drop in use. Taiwan banned the free distribution of bags in 2001.

Ireland introduced a tax in 2002 and the consumption fell by 90 per cent. French legislators have adopted a law banning non-degradable bags effective in 2010.

The issue – excessive and wasteful use of plastic bags – has hardly registered with Canadians. Environmentalists have not taken up the cause. Nor have governments. Or retailers. For the most part, they still hand out bags as if

there were an infinite supply of the petroleum from which they are made. (One exception is the discount grocery chain Price Choppers, a subsidiary of Nova Scotia-based Sobey's Inc. They charge \$.05 per bag at their 89 Ontario stores.)

Consumers, meanwhile, use plastic bags to carry merchandise from the check-out counter to the car and from the car to the home. Then they generally toss them in the garbage, or use them to pick up dog doo-doo. On average, a bag is in use for all of 20 minutes.

However, there is a tiny Quebec company, NaturSac, located in the Montreal suburb of Laval, that is attempting to do something about this tide of waste and indifference. The NaturSac principals, Gerard Raimbeault and Roger Charron, took up the challenge more or less by accident.

They have another company that sells point-of-sale technology to retailers and they frequently encountered merchants, particularly those in the health foods and nutrients business, who were looking for an alternative to disposable plastic bags. Sensing an opportunity, Raimbeault and Charron investigated and found the French-made

NEOSAC – a bio-degradable polyethylene bag which, its developers say, will deteriorate within three months when exposed to the elements.

Twelve companies collaborated on the development of the product. They commissioned a research facility called the Centre d'Evaluation et de Photoprotection, which in turn worked with a number of French universities. The chemical contents of the NEOSAC are proprietary and have not been disclosed, but the product is a standard polyethylene bag that contains a number of additives.

The NEOSAC will remain stable for up to a year in storage or if used inside. The developers say that if it is left outside and exposed to sunlight and weather, it will break down into water, carbon dioxide and non-toxic residues that can be consumed by micro-organisms.

Two years ago, NaturSac acquired North American distribution rights and Charron began knocking on doors in Quebec and pitching the NEOSAC.

He started with small merchants who sell health foods, dietary supplements and organic produce and moved

on to independent grocers affiliated with Metro, one of the big food retailers in Quebec. About 100 of them are now using the product and Sobey's is testing them in four Montreal stores.

All told, NaturSac expects to sell 500 million of its bags in Quebec this year. That sounds huge, but it's not, says Charron. "You'd fall off your chair if you knew how many bags are distributed in Quebec annually," he says.

The exact number probably isn't known, since no one keeps track of such things, but he says the three big grocery chains in the province, Provigo, Metro and Sobey's, hand out an estimated 20 billion.

Charron and Raimbeault are so optimistic about the market potential that they want to build a plant to produce the bags in Canada and they are looking for backers.

The NEOSAC is an intriguing concept and would alleviate a hitherto neglected environmental problem.

But along with adopting bio-degradable plastic bags, consumers, retailers and governments should be reducing consumption, which is, by any measure, shamefully excessive.

(D'Arcy Jenish can be reached at jenish@businessedge.ca)

OPINION



D'Arcy Jenish
Business Edge