

## *A Peek at Packaging (Grades 5-12)*

### **Overview**

Nearly everything we buy comes in some sort of package. Packaging, made from a variety of renewable and non-renewable resources, is necessary to protect an item, keep it fresh, make it tamper-proof, and make the item easy to transport and store. In this activity, students will examine the pros and cons of different packaging strategies.

### **Objectives**

Students will describe the different purposes for packaging, identify the pros and cons of different types of packaging and explore how packaging affects our decisions as consumers.

### **Time**

Preparation: 20 minutes

Part A: 45 minutes

Part B: 45 minutes

Part C: 45-60 minutes

### **Materials**

- Samples of different kinds of packaging
- The Good and the Bad – Packaging Facts
- Consumer Choices Worksheet
- Supermarket Safari Worksheet (if planning on doing Part C)

### **Background**

At the most basic level, packaging is needed to hold items together in the size or amount desired for purchase. The concept behind product packaging has evolved over time, changing to fit needs or demands of consumers as much as to fit the economic demands on manufacturers. The earliest forms of packaging employed animal skins, earthenware vessels, and woven baskets. Glass bottles, fired clay amphorae, and finished leather were developed between 2,500 and 3,500 years ago. Packaging as we know it in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is relatively new, having had its start with the advent of economically efficient packaging machinery in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to its basic role of holding goods together, packaging also protects, preserves, and eases the distribution of many of the products we buy. The very nature of the products we consume dictates the kind of materials used in the packaging process. Canning certain food items and other perishables assure maximum shelf-life and freshness; paper milk cartons or plastic jugs allow for easy pouring and storage; plastic boxes with shrink wrap packaging for items like compact disks allow for maximum display in a minimum amount of space; large cardboard boxes of laundry detergent help consumers purchase bulk items that will be used often. In many instances (such as for food and health care products) packaging prevents contamination and provides tamper-proof protection for the consumer. Packaging also provides a convenient surface for displaying important consumer information as well as advertising space for the manufacturer.



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Manufacturers and consumers have become more aware of the impact of packaging on the environment, as well as the conservation of natural resources, energy and waste management. Some companies are changing the materials used in their packaging; others have reduced, or even eliminated packaging of some products; still others are increasing the amount of recycled material used to make their packaging.

In many instances, the need for packaging, and the kinds of materials used in packaging, is self-evident (such as baby food in small, easy-to-use, product-preserving glass jars). Sometimes, however, it may be difficult to understand why a certain package has been used (a tall box of cereal may be only two-thirds full due to the settling that occurs during shipping). Students should be prepared to ask informed questions about packaging and make responsible purchasing decisions based on an analysis of the information. The following activity will help them compare packaging practices and choose wisely the kind of products and their packages that best suit the needs as consumers.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Gather examples of different kinds of packaging (or ask students to bring in 1-2 examples from home). Make copies of fact and work sheets to hand out to students.

### **Activities:**

#### *Part A– Taking a Closer Look*

1. Set out the examples of packaging you brought in. Discuss each package and the product it contains (or contained) with the entire group. Use the questions on the “Consumer Choices” worksheet and the information on the worksheet “*The Good and the Bad – Packaging Facts*” to guide a conversation about the packaging.
2. Ask students why they think each product is packaged that way it is (cost, ease in shipment, public health, protection from damage). Ask them what the pros and cons are of each package in terms of protections, bulkiness, tamper resistance, recycled materials, and so forth.

#### *Part B- Pick a Product*

1. Ask students to bring in two packages that they feel are properly packaged, and two that they feel are improperly or insufficiently packaged.
2. Have students work in teams and select three to five items to evaluate.
3. Give each team a copy of the “Consumer Choices” worksheet for each item they will evaluate. Have students work together to complete the questions. Point out how to tell whether a product is made from recycled material. (Look for a recycled sign).
4. Have each team share its analysis of one product with the rest of the group. You might suggest that the team members separate their examples into two categories, one for packaging they think could be improved (e.g., by changing the design or materials; by adding or eliminating material; etc.) and one for packaging that seems fine the way it is.



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### *Part C- Supermarket Safari*

Take a trip to a local supermarket for a “Supermarket Safari” in which students try to find at least one item that fits into the category of packaging:

- Packaged well
- Packaged poorly
- Packaged primarily to attract the consumer (packaging that is pretty, colorful, fancy, etc.)
- Packaged in bulk
- Packaged with a material that has been recycled
- Packaged with a material that is recyclable
- Packaged in something reusable by the consumer

### **Extension**

Have the students create an ideal package for one of the products they evaluated. Have students draw or create the packaging out of materials (paper, cardboard, foam, etc.) or recycled school or home items (newspaper, greeting cards, used wrapping paper, etc.). Then have them make a presentation on why their package suits their product. Presentations can be written or oral. Evaluate the proposed package.

- Does it address health concerns (for freshness or tampering)?
- Can it be reused or recycled?
- Does it have enough labeling to satisfy the manufacturer or the consumer?
- Is it convenient for shipping and shelf display?
- Can the product, as packaged, be conveniently used by the consumer



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