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Retailers burst plastic bubble

*The *&%\$# clamshells that are a pain to open are going away*

By Mary Ellen Podmolik
Special to the Tribune
September 3, 2006

You buy vitamins or a video game, tools or a toy. All that now stands between you and your purchase is a thick layer of rigid plastic that seems tougher to crack than Ft. Knox.

The ever-so-frustrating process of opening it has yielded the term wrap rage. But now there are moves by leading retailers and consumer products manufacturers to replace that plastic packaging with materials that would be friendlier to the consumer and the environment.

The end may be near for the seemingly impenetrable plastic clamshell package.

Costco Wholesale Corp. will begin rolling out to its membership warehouses this fall more product packaging that combines plastic and stiff cardboard.

With these hybrids, consumers can still see the product through the plastic bubble, but the edges are cardboard. And while consumers still will need scissors to cut and separate the sealed cardboard halves, the process will involve cutting a flat piece of cardboard rather than piercing welded plastic ridges and a molded case.

Consumers will notice the difference

“Oh yeah,” said Scott Carnie, general manager of Costco’s East Coast packaging facility, who has been working on the project for two years, “They’re going to go ... `Why the heck didn’t they do that already?’”

Among those getting on board is Phoenix Wireless Inc., a Hatfield, Pa.-based maker of wireless phone accessories, which has changed all its packaging in the past year to feature clamshells that are snapped together rather than sealed, making them easier to pry open.



And last week, Walgreens and Kmart began stocking a new package of Releev cold sore medicine that is a combination of plastic and cardboard.

Plastic clamshells now account for about a third of all see-through consumer packaging, or more than 6 billion clamshells in U.S. stores, according to the Freedonia Group Inc., a Cleveland-based industrial market research firm. Their popularity with product manufacturers and retailers has soared as big-box stores such as Best Buy, Wal-Mart, Target, and Costco have proliferated.

Why clamshells are used

The packaging takes up less shelf space than paperboard boxes, meaning stores can put more items on display, and it's easier for consumers to see the merchandise. Also, because scissors or a knife is required to open the package, it's more difficult for shoplifters to take out the merchandise.

But what's frustrating for thieves in a store can be just as frustrating, or painful, for consumers at home with their paid-for goods.

"None of them would readily admit it, but [retailers] get tremendous complaints about the opening of those packages," said Mike Skrovanek, general manager of Natralock, a cardboard and plastic packaging product from MeadWestvaco Corp. that Costco is using.

In March, Consumer Reports published the Oyster Awards, its list of the hardest-to-open packages. The overall winner was the clamshell.

"There seems to be a groundswell among consumer advocacy groups that there has to be something done about this," said Freedonia Group analyst Joe Iorillo. "I think this could be the start of a big push. If you get retailers like Costco and other companies like Wal-Mart behind a certain form of packaging, that could be a bellwether to get other retailers in line."

A key development in packaging that may lessen the reliance on those ornery containers is the ability to effectively seal layers of thick cardboard so a hybrid package remains tamper-proof but contains up to 80 percent less plastic.

Companies ranging from Hewlett-Packard to Wal-Mart say they have increased their commitment to protecting the environment. Another benefit is the bottom line, since resin prices have ballooned in recent years.

Costco's Carnie says manufacturer interest in the new technologies is "staggering."

"I'm primarily looking at getting rid of the clamshell," he said. "I want to use [the new packaging] with tools, with small appliances, with auto, with seasonal goods. There's nothing that shouldn't be looked at."

Lake Forest-based Colbert Packaging, which two years ago helped Topps USA get rid of clamshell containers for its premium line of baseball cards, now is working on paper packaging that would contain no plastic.

The trick, companies say, is balancing the need for security with the desire for customer convenience.

When Walgreens asked Barrington-based Merix Pharmaceutical Corp. to repackage its Releev cold sore medicine in a tamper-proof clamshell rather than a paper carton, chief executive Meryl Squires considered it. But she instead chose a hybrid package that is easier to open than the clamshell used by her leading competitor.

“They’re kind of deadly sometimes,” Squires said of clamshells.

In some of Costco’s aisles, there is already evidence of change. For instance, one pallet of Sonicare replacement toothbrushes features the merchandise encased in a clamshell. On the next pallet are packages combining cardboard with plastic. Consumers who flip the package over will find perforated cutting lines that show how to remove the cardboard to get to the toothbrushes.

‘These are insane’

Such developments would be good news to people like Donna Sanfilippo of Orland Park, who on a recent shopping trip to Costco voiced the frustration felt by consumers.

“These are insane,” she said of the clamshell container in her shopping cart. “You jump up and you swear and then you cut it and you can’t cut it. You fight with it.”

She said she has never cut herself while trying to open a clamshell.

But a few aisles away, as he pondered buying a wall scanner encased in a clamshell, Lombard resident William Fairchild said he hasn’t been so lucky.

He has given up trying to use scissors to open the cases. “You have to use a knife and then you cut yourself,” he said. “I jabbed my hand one time, and then [the container] fills up your garbage can.”

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