

Tales From Packaging Hell

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The stubborn plastic casing around the Microsoft Xbox 360 faceplate seemed to laugh first at the kitchen scissors and then the steak knife that tried to penetrate it. When 14-year-old Daniel Mroue's attempt to open the thing with a long, serrated bagel knife failed, his parents became concerned.

Mroue's father, George, took over with a pair of box-cutters, which did the trick. But George Mroue also ended up with a wad of bandages shoring up the damage after slicing his palm open on a sharpened piece of plastic.

"It was ridiculous," groused George Mroue of the February incident. "There was nothing anywhere telling us how to open the (darn) thing. I don't understand why they make it so goddamn hard to open these things."

That's an increasingly common question these days. From [Psychlone](#) electronics cables encased in impenetrable layers of thick plastic to [DigiPower](#) camera batteries coated with packaging several times the size of the item itself, the hardest part of buying electronics these days is opening the products when you get them home. In many cases, it makes solving *Halo 2* seem like a kindergarten project.

The bottom line is the bottom line. Retailers demand the hard-to-open packaging to avoid "shrinkage," or shoplifting, a problem that cost U.S. stores more than \$10 billion a year or \$25 million a day, according to statistics from the [National Association for Shoplifting Prevention](#). They also want the item to be visible to customers and capable of withstanding the rigors of long-distance shipping from manufacturing plants in Asia.

"In a nutshell, it is pretty much all about retail theft," says Mary Ann Falkman, editor-in-chief of [Packaging Digest](#), a trade publication. "Retailers like Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy and the like who sell these small electronic toys and gadgets demand that they be put in packaging that's next to impossible to steal from. But they could make it easier to open it when you get it home."

The nemesis of electronics buyers everywhere is something known in the business as the clamshell or blister packaging, those packages made of one or two layers of polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, plastic and soldered around the edges.

The issue has become such a problem for customers that [Consumer Reports](#) in March issued its

first-ever Oyster Awards, a tongue-in-cheek "honor" for the most difficult-to-open packaging genres. Topping that list was the packaging that electronics are most frequently found in, the PVC clamshell.

But it's not just a matter of customer frustration. These packages pose real danger. Data on the topic is irregularly collected and vague; the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's most recent accounting, in 2001, listed "unintentional cut/pierce" as the fifth most common cause of nonfatal unintentional injury, but that also includes the much more common assortments of knife accidents owing to normal kitchen work.

Anecdotally, though, emergency room doctors say they're slammed the week after Christmas with such injuries and see them regularly all year. Dr. Christian Arbelaez, a Boston-area ER physician, sees about a case a week, some as serious as tendon and nerve damage that require orthopedic surgeons to repair.

"I would definitely like to tell (manufacturers) that serious hand injuries are occurring because of this packaging," said Arbelaez, a member of the Trauma Care and Injury Control National Committee of American College of Emergency Physicians. "Especially for people who have jobs that require the use of their hands a lot, this can be detrimental to their careers. There needs to be some kind of change."

One of the more perplexing parts of the issue to Mroue is that the Xbox faceplate that injured him cost about \$20, hardly a big-ticket item. Theo Unger of the Seattle area is equally baffled by that; he cut himself on the plastic packaging of a \$10 Dynex headphone splitter. Dynex is a subsidiary of [Best Buy](#).

"To be honest, I probably cut myself because I was so pissed off and just started hacking at the thing," said Unger, a 34-year-old real estate agent. "It all seems so idiotic."

But John Zittrauer, spokesman for the Best Buy store in the Chelsea section of New York, says it adds up. With big-ticket items like MP3 players, cell phones and digital cameras kept under lock, it's the small stuff hanging from bars and on shelves that pose the risk.

"If we make weak packaging for a \$10 item and we lose 30 of them, then it's a \$300 item now," Zittrauer said. "I agree, they are a lot of times a pain to get open. But it's a tough line to walk to make things not easily accessible for theft protection before purchase and easy to open after purchase."

Store chains, in fact, make distinct demands on manufacturers. [Hewlett Packard](#) packages its inkjet cartridges differently, for example, for Office Depot than for Costco, and HP does away with the clamshells altogether in favor of cardboard boxes for people who order the cartridges from the HP website, global packaging manager Alison Kent said.

Kent said HP, responding to customer complaints, has tried to make it easier to open the clamshells by putting indents in the plastic and instructing people on where to cut.

Many manufacturers are beginning to tune into the problem. MP3 player maker [iriver](#) recently

switched to paper boxes for its top-end offerings. [Energizer](#) started packaging its batteries with slits in the back of the clamshell to give customers a point of entry. [Monster Cable](#) is already a leader in easy-to-open packages -- for years it has encased its cables in plastic containers bolted together with rivets at the corners that are simple to pull apart. The company says its upcoming next generation of packages will be even easier.

And one Richmond, Virginia, packaging company, [MeadWestvaco](#), markets itself on grounds that it has devised packaging from a thinner, recyclable plastic and cardboard that can be easily cut with scissors as a better way to balance the store-display and theft-prevention needs and the ease-of-opening factor.

Others may soon reconsider. An executive with Performance Design Products, which makes electronics accessories under the labels Pelican and Headbanger Audio, acknowledges something needs to be done.

"As a consumer myself of other products, I've always wondered how the heck do I get this open," said Paul Chen, PDP's vice president of content and licensing. "We could probably do a better job to outline the best way to open this product. That is something to consider."

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