

Using Reusable Bags: It's Not That Easy

THE CLAIM OF THE BAG BANNERS: "BRINGING A REUSABLE BAG ISN'T SO HARD!"

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One of the most often heard claims by those who advocate imposing bag bans on everyone else, is that using reusable bags is not very hard to do. Here are a few of their typical statements:

- "I've happily been using reusable bags for years, so others should too."
- "What's the big deal about remembering to bring your bag?"
- "Some people will resist it at first, but eventually they will change and get used to it."
- "Sometimes it is hard to change habits, but people will change. They just need encouragement."
- "Look! I carry a few compacted reusable bags right on my purse strap!"
- "It is easy! It isn't so hard!"

These statements are often delivered in an exasperated or condescending tone, implying that people are making a big deal out of nothing. The real basis for their argument is this: They do it, so others should not complain when they are forced to do it as well.

Setting aside the argument about whether or not it is right to force others to adopt an assumed green lifestyle, we wanted to examine why using reusable bags is challenging and why compliance with using reusable bags is so low, even in communities that have already implemented bag bans.

Statistics

Surveys at grocery stores before and after bag bans show that most people are choosing **not** to use reusable bags. In San Jose, the number of customers leaving grocery stores with **no bag** went up from 12.9% to 43.5% and the number of customers using paper bags went up from 10.3% to 18.8% after the bag ban. (Romanov, 2012) Similarly, in Santa Monica customers with **no bag** went up from 15% to 36% and paper bags went up from 5% to 29%. (Team Marine, 2013) The statistics for non-grocery stores are even worse, with an abysmal 8% of shoppers using reusable bags almost 2 years after the bag ban. (van Leeuwen & Williams, 2013, p. 12)

Using reusable bags must not be that easy, since the vast majority of shoppers avoid using these bags and choose to use either paper bags or no bags at all over reusable bags by a ratio of about two to one. (van Leeuwen & Williams, 2013)

Reusable Bag Difficulties

Bag bans are meant to force people into using reusable bags, since bag bans impose a ban on free plastic carryout bags and a fee on paper bags, which remove and penalize non-reusable bag options.

However, even with these personal penalties, statistics show that only about one-third (1/3) of shoppers manage to use reusable bags at all even in the most ideal situation of grocery shopping. A number of factors are directly responsible that make using reusable bags an inconvenience and a chore that most people will avoid, either purposely or accidentally.

Purchasing, stocking, and maintaining reusable bags

First, how many bags does a family need? Considering that there are typically 2 main shoppers in the family, each would have to have enough bags to cover their largest shopping trip. Let's assume that is eight (8) bags each for a total of sixteen (16) bags. Then, they would need secondary bags for those times that the primary bags are dirty, in the laundry, or in the wrong place and unavailable. So that is an additional eight (8) bags, for a total of twenty-four (24) bags. While this appears to be a large number of bags, in reality a family may have many more bags than this, as they are accumulated through giveaways and by purchases when they forget their bags. However, even when a family has 30 or 40 bags, they typically use only a few of the best ones, and the rest are never or rarely used. Eventually, the over accumulation of reusable bags leads to disposal of the "excess and underused" reusable bags in the landfill. (Munro, 2010) Ironically, this is the ultimate waste as many reusable bags never even see a single use.

Second, where are the bags stored? For typical families they end up being stored in 3 locations: In a pile by the entry door, in a pile in the kitchen, and in piles kicking around in the trunks, floors, or backseats of one or more cars. [Note: In reality, the guidelines state that reusable bags are not to be kept in cars, as heat buildup in the car interior increases bacteria growth. (Gerba, Williams, & Sinclair, 2010, p. 12)]

Third, even after going through all this work, the person who is in a rush, struggles to park their car, and is thinking about what they need to purchase (or is just plain daydreaming...) OFTEN forget and leave their bags in the car. No matter how many times they do it, or how many months or years pass, people STILL forget and leave their bags in the car. Even signs in the parking lot reminding customers to bring their reusable bags lose their effect over time, as the signs blend in with the surroundings and other thoughts occupy the mind.

Shopping trip planning

How many shopping trips are actually planned out as opposed to spur of the moment? How many people know where and when they will shop, exactly how much they will buy, and how many bags are needed? Bag banners paint a picture of a joyfully compliant eco-conscious citizen driving their Prius down to the local Whole-Foods store with their pre-calculated allotment of recently inspected and cleaned reusable bags for their precisely planned shopping trip. However, this picture is a myth and far cry from the reality experienced daily by most shoppers.

Remember that used reusable bags are not to be stored in cars. So preparing for a shopping trip must start hours in advance in gathering up bags and putting them in the car. Also, in communities that have banned plastic carryout bags at ALL retail stores, customers should carry reusable bags with them even if they are window shopping or browsing at the mall, just in case they actually want to purchase

something. While female bag ban proponents proudly state they carry around compact bags in their purses, even those bags take a lot of extra effort to clean and refold after each use. Since most men don't normally carry a purse or bag, it is additionally burdensome, which is why you rarely see a man walking around a mall with an armload of reusable bags just in case he sees something he wants to buy.

Unplanned shopping trips cause additional difficulties. Should the shopper first go home to get their bags (thereby wasting fuel, time, and adding more pollutants to the atmosphere) and then return to the store, buy paper bags, buy more reusable bags, or go without?

And how many people purchase ONLY what they planned? Ever go to the grocery store to pick up a gallon of milk, only to see other items on sale or pass by the condiment aisle that reminds you that you are out of ketchup, mustard, and relish? And you are in real trouble if Oreo cookies are on sale! The customer then faces the dilemma: They left their bags in the car as they had not planned on buying that much. So should they buy the items while they remember and are still at the store, or try to remember them next time? Or should they face the penalty of having to buy a few paper bags that they will never again reuse and when they get home directly put in the recycle bin? Or do they buy an additional reusable bag or two to add to their already burgeoning collection at home?

Segregating bags for different purposes

All reusable bag guidelines state that a person should designate reusable bags for different products. In particular, meat and poultry and fish should be carried in designated reusable bags, and those bags must be washed after every use. (California Department of Public Health) And what about bags for dirty items, such as potted plants or toxic chemicals like ant spray or rat poison? Should they go in the same bag that is used for breakfast cereal? A user needs to designate at least 3 different types of reusable bags: meat/poultry, dry goods, and dirty/dangerous chemical goods.

In addition to designating all the different types of reusable bags, the user must also ensure that they explain to the checkout clerk which bag is for which purpose, so they don't cross-contaminate. So don't start fumbling with a credit card or checkbook, because you need to keep a close eye on which bag the clerk is using and likely remind them a few times as they deal with hundreds of customers a day. They cannot be expected to remember, after telling them once, that the pink bag with yellow flowers is for meat; and the green city-sponsored bag is for fresh fruit and vegetables; and the violet bag is for soap, detergents, and dangerous chemicals; while the other three bags are for dry goods.

Thus, not only does the quantity of bags need to be managed, but the purposes of the bags as well, in order to maintain sanitary conditions and reduce the risk of cross-contamination. (Gerba, Williams, & Sinclair, 2010)

Bag Handling

Another issue is handling of the reusable bags. In the kitchen, after putting the groceries away, the area where reusable bags were placed should be cleaned, especially if the surface is later used to prepare or serve food items. (California Department of Public Health)

At the store, it is recommended that reusable bags be placed on the bottom shelf of the grocery cart. (California Department of Public Health) Unfortunately, kids ride on carts and stick their shoes down there potentially contaminating your bags. Also, the bottom shelf is where people put goods that often have been stored on the floor, such as boxes of sodas, dog food, or other heavy items. If you put reusable bags in the cart, they may become contaminated from brushing against meat, poultry, or fish purchases that are not properly placed in clear plastic bags. Furthermore, any shopping will then cover up the reusable bags in the cart, meaning extra time at the checkout stand to sort things out. And putting them in the upper cart/child seat area where parents place their small children may also not be a good solution due to contact with children's dirty diapers and shoes. Safely tucking the bags under your arm while you hobble around the store to do your shopping is the best and safest, but probably not a good solution either! Therefore, if clutching your bags while you shop is not an option, you will have to endure the risk of bag contamination in the cart.

Furthermore, at checkout, reusable grocery bags should not be placed on the check stand conveyer belt and should be handed directly to the checker/bagger to avoid additional contamination. (California Department of Public Health)

In addition, to proper handling to prevent contamination, the user should carefully handle bags to prevent the spread of disease, particularly during flu season. To avoid this hazard, the customer is the safest if they pack their own groceries, and not allow store clerks to handle their bags as the clerks are handling other people's contaminated bags all day long. Did the person in line directly in front of the customer have the flu, and just hand their bags to the checker, who then goes on to handle your bags? (See also "*Disease Transmission Through Contact With Contaminated Objects*" on next page.)

The user must also be careful where reusable bags are kept or placed, even temporarily. Car floor areas are generally very dirty, as well as parking lots, benches, bathroom areas (e.g. if the customer visits a bathroom during their shopping trip), and counter tops. These areas should be avoided, if possible, when using reusable bags. (Yu)

Proper bag handling is required to avoid contamination and disease transmission, and it is certainly not easy. What typically happens is that shoppers cannot deal with the inconvenience of safely managing reusable bags. Thus, safety is sacrificed for convenience, and since reusable bags are often found to contain a large number of contaminants, the trade-off results in an increased exposure to potential health hazards.

Public Transportation/Bicycling/Walking

Not everyone has a car with space to conveniently carry reusable bags. A significant portion of the population, particularly the poor, take buses, use bicycles, or walk. Living the reusable bag lifestyle is particularly burdensome to them, as the physical difficulties in carrying reusable bags is completely unacceptable. In addition, the cost burdens of the paper bag penalty fee (also known as "minimum charge") is proportionately higher compared with their income level. As with many nanny-state laws, the poor are the most affected.

Disease Transmission Through Contact With Contaminated Objects

It should be noted that the influenza virus is transmitted among humans by direct contact with individuals, by contact with contaminated objects, and by inhalation of virus laden aerosols. A sick person speaking, breathing, coughing, and sneezing will produce virus laden aerosols with the largest droplets falling to the ground and contaminating reusable bags in the immediate vicinity while the smaller droplets may remain suspended in the air for very long periods of time. It has been shown that the infectious influenza virus may persist on paper currency for several weeks. Hence, reusable bags could be an object to transmit the influenza virus to others during an outbreak. (Racaniello, 2009)

Other diseases that are commonly spread by means of contaminated objects include the common cold, cold sores, conjunctivitis, coxsackievirus (hand-foot-mouth disease), croup, E. coli infection, Giardia infection, influenza, lice, meningitis, rotavirus diarrhea, Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and strep. (Kanchanaraksa, 2008)

In addition, the dreaded Norovirus, a leading cause of gastroenteritis and the most common cause of food borne outbreaks in the United States can also be transmitted by contaminated objects including contaminated reusable bags. (Repp & Keene, 2012)

It should be noted that E-Coli can live up to 16 months on dry inanimate surfaces. C-diff spores have a "shelf life" of up to 5 months, staph and strep can both live over 6 months. (Ministry Health Care, 2010)

In a press release, Dr. Charles Gerba, a professor at the University of Arizona who conducts research about the transmission of pathogens through the environment, issued the following statement: "*The latest outbreak of norovirus reinforces the research we have conducted about the propensity of reusable grocery bags to act as hosts for dangerous foodborne bacteria and viruses. In reality, reusable bags are likely at fault much more often than we realize: cases often go unreported and uninvestigated. ... This incident should serve as a warning bell: **permitting shoppers to bring unwashed reusable bags into grocery and retail stores not only poses a health risk to baggers but also to the next shoppers in the checkout line.***" (Kuntz, 2012)

Inspecting, washing, drying, replacing

Reusable bags must be inspected regularly, typically after every use. Soiled bags must be sanitized, wiped out, or put in the laundry. Stained, ripped, or dirty bags should be replaced. Bags used for meat and poultry or dangerous chemicals must be handled carefully and washed after every use. (California Department of Public Health) (Yu)

Many reusable bags cannot be washed in the washing machine and dried in the dryer. These bags must be hand washed and sanitized and air dried. While air drying sounds simple, clotheslines are a thing of the past, and consumers will have to find a location where they can hang up a bunch of wet reusable bags to dry. This process takes time and is recommended to be done monthly. (Yu)

Machine washing bags is not easy either. Not only does it take time, water, and energy, but questions arise: Should reusable bags be washed with underwear and socks? How about towels, pants, or soiled clothes? The best method is to wash them separately, and guidelines say to wash them in hot water to kill germs. Planning and time is required to gather up reusable bags, wash them, and dry them. These are more bag management responsibilities and headaches.

Wasted Time

If you are highly motivated and interested in something, then you do not mind putting in the time required to further that interest. The problem with bag ban proponents is that they are blind to the amount of time and effort required, as they feel warm and fuzzy about using reusable bags, which they believe is good for the environment. They even look forward to the opportunity to proudly use their reusable bags as a statement to the world of their “environmental consciousness.” They do not understand why people opposing bag bans would be upset when their valuable time is wasted on something that they do not believe in and which they believe is totally unnecessary. Furthermore, politicians passing bag bans never consider the time requirements imposed on their citizens, nor do they attempt to recognize or to quantify the value of this time commitment. When bag bans are passed, the city politicians ask only one question: How much will it cost the CITY to impose the law? What is the benefit to the CITY? There is simply NO concern about the financial cost or the additional time and effort required of community residents to comply with the bag ban, which adds up to millions of dollars per year per city.

Using reusable bags consumes time in a number of ways:

- Time to find, buy, organize, and manage reusable bags
- Time to stock bags in each location
- Time to collect bags from cars and organize them in carts or carry them into stores
- Time to prepare bags for use by the checkers, explain any restrictions to checkers (such as which bags should be used for meats and poultry), and interaction time with checkers
- Time to run back to the car, if bags were forgotten or not enough bags were brought into the store. Worse yet, the time to drive an extra trip or distance home to pick up reusable bags
- Time to inspect, wipe clean, and fold reusable bags for reuse
- Time to wash bags when needed (either by hand or in the washing machine)
- Time to restock bags in proper locations

Even a few minutes per week to manage reusable bags results in hours per year, in addition to the time required to wash and clean bags. These time demands result in at least 10 to 20 hours per year per family. At the average California labor rate of \$25 per hour, that is \$250 to \$500 per year per family in time consumed, in addition to the out-of-pocket costs to purchase and wash reusable bags.

Stress, Frustration, Resentment

All of these challenges add up to a significant amount of stress. In addition to everything else going on, such as planning a person’s day, deciding where to go, what to buy, and what to eat, caring for children, or managing and optimizing schedules, now people are burdened with having to remember reusable

bags for all of these events. Did they bring enough bags? What will they do with the bags during the part of the day they are not shopping?

The second emotion people feel is frustration. A person's frustrated look or expression is often seen in stores when they realize they forgot their reusable bags (even if the bags are in the car) or purchased more than they planned. Unfortunately, the store clerks are the main outlet for customer frustration. Customers will often try to get the clerk to pass them a free bag (illegally), and blame them if they insist on the bag charge. Checkout stands turn into scenes from a communist movie or prohibition, where the consumer is looking around at the video cameras and whispering to the clerk to slip them a free bag against the government's iron hand.

Stress and frustration lead to resentment. People resent two things: Politicians who treated them like children and who prevent them from getting a simple clean plastic bag when they need it based on senseless arguments, and the stores and clerks who now smile at them and ask "how many bags would you like to buy?" Let's face it, 10 cents is not that much to spend on a bag, yet time after time shoppers absolutely refuse to pay it. So why are people so reluctant and resentful? Because the bag was always free and people believe they should be free as a service. Thus, people end up walking out of stores with armfuls of merchandise or loaded back into the shopping cart rather than succumb to the demands of the politicians or the profit of the stores. They refuse to spend the 10 cents or 20 cents to buy bags. Some people even refuse to buy or shop in cities that have bag bans not only out of principle but also because of the added inconvenience.

Conclusion

Obviously, bringing and using reusable bags is not that easy, otherwise people would already be using them and no law would be needed. The government mandated ban on safe, clean, convenient, and free plastic bags from stores and fees on paper bags have only resulted in a marginal increase in reusable bag usage. The vast majority of the citizens simply refuse to deal with the added effort, cost, and inconvenience of using reusable bags.

Further compounding the problem is the natural resistance of people to comply with a mandated choice and the resulting loss of freedom and liberty. Mandating that people act a certain way or live a different lifestyle produces resistance, which makes using a reusable bag more than just an inconvenience, but something that stirs up anger and resentment.

The best solution is for the government to present the advantages and disadvantages of using reusable bags, then allow consumers to make their own choice. Then, consumers could use reusable bags when it was convenient and manageable, and receive plastic bags when it was the better choice for their situation. And since plastic grocery bags are typically reused for other purposes over 76% of the time, many customers PREFER to receive plastic bags so it avoids their need to purchase more trash can liners or other plastic bags. Plastic grocery bags are not only sanitary, safe and convenient, but are also very useful. Unfortunately, City Councils have made it illegal for retailers to distribute these beneficial bags in many cities.

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