

# Are Plastic Grocery Bags Falsely Labeled as “Single-Use” Bags?

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MARKETING GIMMICK RELABELS OFTEN REUSED PLASTIC GROCERY BAGS AS “SINGLE-USE PLASTIC CARRYOUT BAGS”

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Bag Banners have long demonized disposable plastic grocery bags by labeling them as “single-use” plastic carryout bags that, they claim, are only used only a few minutes to carry your groceries home. These claims disputed by citizens who understand that plastic grocery bags are not single-use bags but are reused by consumers for a variety of other purposes. While Bag Banners and public officials only half-heartedly acknowledged such reuse, they steadfastly refused to consider the environmental benefits that such reuse creates. The question “*Are Plastic Grocery Bags Falsely Labeled as ‘Single-Use’ Bags?*” is an important question that will be examined from several perspectives in this paper. In addition, paper grocery bags and also the newly mandated thicker plastic grocery bags will be examined including the terminology used to describe these bags. We intend to expose the **blatant falsehood** behind labeling a shopping bag as either *single-use* or *reusable*.

## Plastic T-Shirt Bags (aka Plastic Grocery Bags)

Plastic grocery bags with handles are actually named “Plastic T-shirt Bags” and come in a variety of sizes, colors, and custom printed logos. They are a time saving convenience for both the retailer and the customer and which offers the retailer a marketing opportunity to advertise their business. For customers, they are not only convenient, clean, and safe, but they also serve a multitude of other uses after transporting their purchases home. So how did these safe, clean, convenient and reused plastic “T-shirt bags” get relabeled as “Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags” in city, county, and state laws?

## Relabeling Plastic Grocery Bags as Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags

The primary goal of Bag Banners is to change consumer behavior by persuasion, if not by coercion, into using reusable shopping bags instead of disposable plastic and paper bags. In order to bolster their case, the attention had to be narrowed to the “one time” initial use of carrying groceries home by relabeling these bags as “Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags” and to contrast that with the implied higher *value* of using “re-usable bags” meant to be used over and over to bring purchases home. In fact, Bag Banners even went so far as to estimate the number of minutes for that “single use” to further justify elimination of these bags.

By relabeling plastic groceries bags as “Single-Use” bags, Bag Banners purposely demonized these bags giving the **false impression** that single-use bags are **bad** and reusable bags are **good**. For example, the

term *single-use* is never applied to any other disposable plastic bag such as a newspaper bag and plastic garbage bag. In fact, why is a plastic grocery bag any more “single use” than a plastic newspaper bag or plastic garbage bag? In fact, why aren’t ALL plastic bags labeled “single use”? Again, this is evidence of the deliberate portrayal of disposable plastic grocery bags as **bad** in order to get away with banning this convenient, clean, and safe and perfectly legal product.

While it might seem logical to call a disposable plastic grocery bag a *single-use* bag on the grounds that it is supposedly used only once to carry groceries home, is it honest? In the case of *reusable* shopping bags, the repeated use by consumers to bring groceries home is considered over the entire lifespan of the reusable bag. In the case of the plastic grocery bag, consumer use of that bag over the entire lifespan is **not** considered, and only the initial use from store to home was included in forming the term “Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags”. Had Bag Banners not been so sly and devious and demonstrated a bit more integrity and honesty, they would have considered the environmental advantages of reusing and repurposing the plastic grocery bags. Then, they would have used the generic term “disposable carryout bag” or the proper name “plastic T-Shirt Bags” instead of calling them “Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags”.

### Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags Are Reused by Consumers

In communities where plastic bag bans have been implemented, nothing has drawn the ire of citizens and shoppers like Bag Banners calling plastic grocery bags *single-use carryout bags*. The people know full and well that plastic grocery bags are not single-use bags but are commonly re-used by consumers for a variety of other purposes.

While it is true that retail stores purchase “disposable” plastic bags for a *single-purpose* by their customers to conveniently carry purchases home; that does not make these bags *single-use*! (van Leeuwen, Why Not To Ban Plastic Carry Out Bags, 2012, p. 6)

In fact, the irony of targeting plastic grocery bags for a ban is that they are likely the MOST repurposed and MOST reused product that people bring into their home! The multiple secondary reuses of plastic grocery bags are one of the few success stories of the **3R Program of Recycle, Reuse, and Reduce!** People use them for everything from trash can liners to picking up pet waste, disposal of used diapers, bag lunches, and even containing wet bathing suits after a swim.

In fact, the secondary use of small, thin, plastic grocery bags negates the larger negative environmental effect of alternative bags such as paper bags and other thicker or larger bags. For example, instead of lining trash cans with grocery bags, people must now purchase larger plastic garbage bags, which (in an ironic twist) are TRULY single-use bags, because no one reuses a garbage bag!

Bag Banners purposely ignored the reality that plastic grocery bags are reused by consumers for secondary purposes because that greatly weakens their case.

## Bag Banner Illogical Labeling Does Not Stop Here!

Most plastic bag bans allow a plastic grocery bag (T-Shirt Bag) made from 2.25 mil thick plastic film to be distributed either free of charge or with a fee of 10-cents. The thin-film (0.5 mil thick) plastic carryout bag is classified as a *single-use* bag; whereas, the 2.25 mil thick plastic carryout bag is classified as a *reusable* bag. Of course, NO evidence exists that shoppers will **reuse** the thicker plastic grocery bags for shopping or even to **recycle** these bags in greater numbers than the thinner *single-use* plastic bags. In fact, an environmental organization [Save Our Shores](#) found that only four (4) out of 740 shoppers returned those thick plastic reusable bags for reuse in carrying groceries home. (Nicholson, 2014)

In other words, calling a bag *reusable* does not mean that shoppers will reuse the bag for shopping. A disposable plastic bag is a disposable plastic bag no matter the thickness of the plastic film from which it is made. Bag Banners are living in fantasy land if they think that calling a disposable plastic grocery bag *REUSABLE* somehow convinces shoppers to reuse those bags for shopping more than once.

One would expect, since consumers like the thicker plastic grocery bags, that they will more than likely be reused for shopping. But no evidence exists to substantiate this claim. The thicker plastic bag is a *reusable* bag “in name only” but a *disposable* bag in actual practice and the only advantage is that they are sturdier and far less likely to become airborne. These thicker plastic bags are just as likely to appear in the litter stream as thin-film plastic grocery bags and are, again *ironically*, worse for the environment.

## A True Single-Use Bag: The Paper Bag!

Most city ordinances banning plastic carryout bags allow paper grocery bags made from 40% post-consumer recycled content, to be distributed for a fee of at least 10-cents. California State Law SB-270, subject to a [referendum](#) in 2016, defines paper grocery bags not having 40% postconsumer content, as *single-use* bags that may not be lawfully distributed.

However, the customer who receives a paper grocery bag will not care whether the bag is made from 40% post-consumer recycled content or from new material. A bag is a bag! In fact, paper grocery bags are required to have printed logos stating that the bag is *REUSABLE* and is made from at least 40% postconsumer recycled content. Yet it can easily be observed that paper grocery bags are not reused by consumers for shopping and instead end up in the landfill or are recycled. You will never see a person carrying a big stack of previously-used paper bags back to a store to reuse them for another visit, yet the bag banners still insist they be labeled “reusable”!

And in yet another example of the upside-down backwards reality, the paper bag is actually far more of a *single use* bag than the plastic grocery bag. Think about it: How many reuses of a paper bag are there? How many people stockpile paper bags to reuse them for other things? They take a lot of room, are large and clumsy, can't hold water or wet materials, and can't be reshaped to better fit whatever is inside. They are virtually worthless for anything other than a book cover, wrapping a package, or lining an animal's cage.

What's more, bag banners claim that paper bags are better because (they claim) up to 50% are recycled, compared to about 5% for plastic grocery bags. Yet they ignore the obvious fact that paper grocery bags have fewer secondary uses than plastic grocery bags resulting in a much higher recycling rate. No doubt the higher recycling rate is also helped by the fact that many people see using paper grocery bags as a waste of trees that they feel guilty about just throwing them away. Also, they are counting paper bags that are thrown into recycling trash cans, while they do not count plastic grocery bags discarded in the same manner. (van Leeuwen, Plastic Bag Recycling Rate – A Non-Issue, 2013)

## Conclusion

While Bag Banners considered consumer use of a reusable bag over the entire lifespan of that bag, they were unwilling to do the same for plastic grocery bags. As a result, the environmental benefit of reusing plastic grocery bags for secondary purposes was totally ignored as they focused on just the *initial-use* to bring groceries home by *falsely* called them "Single-Use Plastic Carryout Bags." But they conveniently ignored the same *single-use* aspect of paper grocery bags and not only continued to allow shoppers to use them (for a fee), but had the manufacturer print "RE-USABLE" in large bold letters on the bag just to try to convince everyone. Likewise, they called thick plastic T-Shirt Bags *reusable* bags even though there is no evidence that these bags are reused at any greater rate by consumers than the thin plastic grocery bags.

Bag Banners live in a fantasy world, where they think that they can make a *disposable* product either *single-use* or *multiple-use* by decree. Bag Banners just don't have that power, consumers do. And the people are smart enough to know the difference!

## About The Authors

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