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Purchasing Guidelines for the Environmentally Conscious Consumer

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The "greening of America" has produced a new wave of individuals who want to be environmentally "correct" in their purchasing decisions. As these individuals develop into environmentally conscious consumers, the flood of information on what is environmentally "correct" and where to find these products has always been confusing and overwhelming. Past studies have shown that close to 70 percent of Americans would actually buy eco-friendly products if it were easy to find out what the benefits were and where exactly to find these products.

The push to "do the right thing" and "buy the right thing" has increased considerably over the years. This increase has been embraced by hundreds of companies and now, information is actually quite easy to find. Magazines, television, radio, and especially the internet have all contributed to the convenience of buying "green." Literally thousands of "green" products are now available in many different categories. With this influx of information, environmentally conscious consumers have a new challenge at hand. What are the proper questions to ask and investigate before making a purchase of one of these eco-friendly products? Is one product better than another for the environment? What goes into the disposal of the product once it is used or thrown away? Do I really need this product? These questions are just a few examples of those that the consumer should be asking. Currently, there is quite a bit of research taking place to provide consumers with answers and sound advice.

Who Is the Environmentally Conscious Consumer?

Still, the choice to be an environmentally conscious consumer is a personal, individual one and there is no true set of rules that applies to all. Most researchers agree that the only way an individual can begin to make these choices and stick with them is to ask intelligent, methodical questions as they pertain to their lifestyle and purchasing habits.

Individuals will have differing levels of need, values, and knowledge related to various products and their uses so there is no single answer on "which is better." What people need to understand is that a commitment to making environmentally conscious decisions means that they are committing to a lifetime of learning and challenging their beliefs regarding product, packages, and the manufacturing of what it is we use to maintain our quality and style of life.

How Do I Learn to Make Environmentally "Correct" Purchases?

Ultimately, it is up to the consumer to not only ask the proper questions when it comes to making purchasing decisions, but also to educate themselves on what to look for in the description of a product. Is it enough to buy something that says it is "organically grown"? What exactly does it mean when a product states that it is made from "recycled material"? What about packaging—is that important to

consider? These are the types of questions that the consumer should begin exploring. With the help of the internet, many organizations have stepped up to the challenge of picking apart the labels and descriptions of these products to help consumers educate themselves. Organizations such as EARTHWORKS, Conscious Consumer, Green People, etc., have made it a bit easier for people to fish out information. There are even web sites similar to those above that cater to teenagers. Teens are probably one of the harder consumer groups to consider going "green" because much of their purchasing decisions are based on conformity and what their friends are buying. If their friends don't agree that buying eco-friendly products is "cool" then the chances of an individual teen sticking to that behavior is slim. One such web site is www.ibuydifferent.org. This web site is a collaboration between the World Wildlife Fund and New American Dream. It is designed with teens in mind and has stories, ideas, and products that have been teen "approved." It also tells teens how they can take action locally as well as globally.

As indicated earlier, the potential for individual action is great as long as that person really identifies how an environmentally responsible action fits into his or her lifestyle. The act of separating materials for recycling is an educational process that leads the environmentally conscious person to better understand their consumption and disposal behavior. Once this becomes part of their everyday practice, they can advance to the next plateau and make purchasing decisions to buy recycled products whenever possible. They realize that collecting and disposing of recyclables and purchasing recycled products are equal components.

Step by step efforts such as above will eventually bring heightened awareness of the environmental factors involved in making "green" purchasing decisions. As these factors become narrow and more focused, what to purchase, how to purchase it, and when to purchase it becomes much clearer. They are better able to ask, and answer, "Is this an environmentally sound product and package based on my knowledge level?"

Some Important Questions to Ask Yourself About a Product

How much do I need this product at this time?

One of the most important and often overlooked question is the person's level of need for the product. Is it actually a "need" or is it really a "want"? This is, of course, a personal choice that will differ from person to person. The question of need includes what use a product holds for the individual and how much of the product should actually be purchased. For example, this decision involves such things as identifying the probable use of household paint when it is purchased in advance, the opportunity there is to obtain the paint within a reasonable time frame for use, and the likelihood that some or much of the paint will be discarded rather than used because it will dry up beforehand.

Determining the personal level of need for a product is a conscious one and marks the prelude to understanding the impacts of the purchase from an environmental perspective. One of the first steps into making an environmentally sound purchase is to ask, "Do I need this product enough to purchase it in this quantity at this time?"

How much of this is packaging waste?

Once a person determines the amount of product needed at a particular time, their next challenge is to investigate the way the product is packaged. A product may claim to be "green," but take a close look at what it is packaged in. How much of this packaging is actually necessary and could it have been done in a more effective manner?

Packaging serves an important function. For example, the United States has the lowest rate of loss of food prior to purchase due largely to efficient packaging. The question that looms over this fact are, "Will a reduction in packaging result in increased cost and product loss?" Many products that are on our shelves—"green" or not—have obvious excessive packaging. Even more, most of that excess can be redesigned to minimize the amount of resulting waste.

Unfortunately, many companies who do wish to minimize their packaging run into regulatory requirements that often make reduction difficult. By law, a small quantity of a pesticide is all that is allowed to be sold at one time. Also, what is required by law to be disclosed on the exterior of a package can, and often does, dictate the size of the package regardless of the content. Small amounts of product are often contained in large packages because space for printed explanations needs to be provided.

Another constraint on the long-term goal of waste reduction is related to consumer expectations of packages and products. People expect packaging to guarantee the safety and purity of the product. For example, medicines are expected to be untainted and to remain secure over the life of the medication. This is assured with several layers of protective packaging, all of which is disposable. It is in the awareness of this additional waste that a consumer becomes more environmentally conscious.

Is this the most appropriate use for this material and are the materials used recyclable?

The primary question an individual can raise relates to the source of the product as well as its packaging. Is the material in both from a renewable resource (such as trees) or a depletable resource (such as aluminum)? Those products that are created from renewable resources are often preferred environmentally, given no other choice. The informed

individual can then begin to ask if both the product and its packaging can be economically recycled.

With the increase desire to be environmentally conscious, there are many ways for the consumer to become educated in what can be recycled and what materials are used for once they are recycled. Some products consist of multiple materials—some that are recyclable and some that are not. Manufactured products and those made with increasing amounts of thermoses plastics, certain types of glass, and fabrics can create disposal problems. An example of this is the interior of an automobile. Some of the fabric and glass could be recycled, but there are plastics and safety glass that cannot. Many times, products like this just go to waste and get dumped. It is funny, however, that, if researched thoroughly, the interior of a car could actually be designed completely from recycled materials.

In addition, toxins that can make recycling hazardous, such as lead, PCBs and CFSs are found in a variety of consumer products. Ironically, many new products that are intended to protect human life and minimize risks become themselves, risk inducing. One example is the car air bag. This uses a propellant that is both explosive and toxic.

What is the solution? In an ideal situation, consumers should avoid the purchase of goods and products that are designed to use nonrecyclable and toxic materials. Realistically, this is probably not practical, so what does one do when there is no available alternative? This is when environmentally conscious consumers can educate themselves in the method of handling the materials once they are used and done with.

How is the material handled in disposal?

This question relates to the characteristics of the product and package content left for final disposal. Is the process environmentally appropriate? Does the product or packaging include any hazardous material? There are both laws and limitations on various materials related to environmentally safe disposal. Awareness of these technologies on the part of the consumer will aid them in making the appropriate environmental decision—not only on the topic of disposal, but also should the product be purchased to begin with—which relates back to need. Much of the disposal of nonrecyclable and hazardous material affects the air, water, and land in the form of pollution. Concerned consumers should now ask themselves, "Is the product I am purchasing, including the packaging, as pollution-free and natural as possible?" In many cases, this question is a tough one because it requires research into the manufacturing and remanufacturing of products.

Further Questions and Education

Advanced questions that relate to the impact of use of a product is whether it is environmentally appropriate or is there an alternative material available or a better choice? Also, does the product create any sort of threat during transportation and storage in the store and/or the home? As the habits of the conscious consumer begin to change and include environmental actions, they will notice that their actions that may have started by recycling newspaper and plastic bottles may grow to buying organic and locally grown food. As they realize the benefits in buying organic, they may begin to look into using solvents, cleansers, and pesticides that are natural.

Education and true lifestyle change will bring the environmentally conscious individual to realize that the ecosystem provides us with all that is used and, if current behavior patterns continue, not much is actually being returned to benefit the ecosystem. What is being returned are toxins, noxious gases, contaminants, and other undesirable compounds—usually being dumped into the water and released into the air.

In 1990, it was estimated that the United States generated approximately 205 million tons of waste. In 2005, U.S. residents, businesses, and institutions produced more than 245 million tons of waste—that is approximately 4.5 lbs per person per day. Unfortunately, the largest portion, over 30 percent, was due to throwing away paper products—most of which could have been recycled. The good news is that at the same time the actual waste numbers rose, the numbers that reflect recycling rates is on the rise as well. In 1990, the recycling rate was 16.2 percent, and 33.2 million tons of materials were recycled. In 2005, the recycling rate was 32.1 percent, and 79 million tons of materials were recycled.

Updated in 2007 by Nadya Bennett. Series edited by Joe E. Heimlich and Jacqueline LaMuth, OSU Extension.