



Thick-skinned

Try an ax

CONSUMER REPORTS Facebook fan Debbie Key actually used a manual can opener, not hedge trimmers, to free this soap dispenser from its plastic clamshell and almost cut herself on the shards.

The company says We suggest that you open the package by using scissors to carefully cut along the top and side of the blister packaging. Then separate both halves of the packaging to remove the product and usage directions.

Packaging gotchas

Mad at hard-to-open, shrinking, undersized, or overwrapped products?

YOU'D THINK THAT companies would get it right. They spend \$130 billion a year on boxes, bags, and blister packs. You spend on packaging, too. According to Joe Angel, vice president and publisher of the trade publication Packaging World, packaging accounts for roughly 7 percent of a product's overall cost, and some of that gets passed along to consumers.

Yet illogical, misleading, and over-the-top packaging continues to annoy consumers, and we have the letters, e-mail, and photos to prove it. The gripes come in four basic types.

- **Oysters**, our term for hard-to-open products. Often, they're gadgets imprisoned in clear, tight-fitting plastic. That displays merchandise from all angles and discourages theft. But it also foils honest folks, who have tried razor blades, scissors, box

cutters, and saws to free the contents they've bought. Other oysters: cereals in stiff bags that split and spew their contents when you pry them open and pills in blister packs that give you a headache even as you're trying to treat your ulcer.

- **Black holes**, or products surrounded by lots of air. Federal law is supposed to prevent excessive "slack fill," nonfunctional or empty space. But there are loopholes in the law if, for instance, the space limits breakage or discourages theft, or if the package does double-duty as a dispenser. One company we were about to criticize actually changed its packaging after buyers complained. Archway modified the tray design for its Original Windmill Cookies "to accommodate a more tightly packaged product," a spokesman told us.

- **Downsized products**, shrunk by companies unwilling just to raise the price.

Downsizing can occur in sneaky ways, as when Huggies reduced the number of Pull-Ups diapers from 72 to 70 but kept the words "New Larger" on the label. Companies usually blame downsizing on higher costs of ingredients, labor, and energy.

- **Golden cocoons**, tiny doodads shipped in giant cartons, sometimes with enough paper, bubble wrap, or airbags (called "void fill" in the packaging industry) to cradle a priceless vase. At least some companies are aware of the problem. (See "Frustration-Free Packaging May Prompt an Oath," on page 14.)

These pages showcase our latest examples of packaging faux pas, submitted by CONSUMER REPORTS' readers and Facebook fans. For each product, we asked a company rep to explain the packaging decision. Usually we received an answer, though not always to the question we asked. Read on.



The package as prison

If elected, she'll liberate dolls from ties that bind. Some toy makers are replacing twist ties, manacles, tabs, string, glue, and plastic strips with molded plastic notches, but Barbie, 53, continues to be held captive, though less so than we've seen in the past. Said Nancy Gratz on Facebook: "Kids lose interest by the time you get it out of the package!"

The company says No response.



Be gentle

LEDs and compact fluorescents such as the Feit come in sealed blister packs. The plastic fits so tightly that you'll need a delicate touch to keep from cracking the bulbs and hurting yourself. As Tori Ash remarked on Facebook, "I love using scissors when a light has gone out."

The company says No response.

Undersized



Air to spare

Uncooked, the shells and sauce occupied little of the container. "Even after adding water and cooking in the microwave," said reader Ken Buckingham of Waynesville, Mo., "the portion seemed a little short."

The company says You have to add water, and the noodles expand. We don't want it to boil over.



Empty compartments

Not only could the bottle fit many more tablets but the box has extra partitions.

The company says We are looking at options that are less challenging to open. (That didn't answer our question, but companies with similar products have told us that they use the same box for periodic promotions such as buy one, get one free.)



Big box, little brownie

The Fiber One bar is about 2½ inches long; its wrapper, about 4½ inches. "No wonder it's only 90 calories," said reader Eric Snell of Ogden, Utah.

The company says We're sorry we cannot give you an exact answer, as we use different suppliers at different times. This has been forwarded to our quality department.



It's the pits

"Not only is the box half full, the bag is only half full," grouched reader Richard Bond. In fact, Bond's estimate may have been too generous.

The company says We will evaluate the current product for improvements.

Downsized



Less pasta—and fiber

"I guess it was too Smart," says reader Susan Richardson of El Segundo, Calif. Not only were the contents trimmed by 2.5 ounces but the fiber was reduced, from 7 grams per serving to 5. Yet the new label proclaims "2.5x the fiber of regular pasta." If true, it's still not good news for people who liked the old fiber amount.

The company says We need to stay competitive. That way, retailers can put it on sale more often. And fiber was trimmed to make the pasta better tasting.

Bittersweet news

"What happened to the five-pound bag of sugar?" asks reader Barbara Boas of Silverdale, Wash.

The company says We offer retailers a 4-pound package to be competitive with many store brands (which already made the switch). The 5- and 10-pound sizes are still available, but the decision on what sizes to carry lies with the chain.



Lowering the bar

When reader Yves Veenstra, of Cherry Hill, N.J., bought a 10-pack of Ivory Soap recently, he felt a difference. "I got home and compared the new bars with one from a prior purchase. Surprise!" Each new Special Edition bar weighs 4 ounces; the old bar weighed 4.5.

The company says Higher manufacturing costs meant increasing bar cost or decreasing bar size.



Cutting coffee

The poster child of downsized products, coffee long ago shrank from its 1-pound can or brick. Maxwell House has chipped away at larger sizes, too: here, from 31.5 ounces to 28. Parent company Kraft boasts that the coffee has a New! Flavor Lock Pack. "Sure does," says reader Peter Barber of Enterprise, Ala. "It locks in 30 fewer cups."

The company says It was either reduce the size or raise the price. And the new pack uses less plastic.

'Frustration-free packaging' may be baffling

Amazon's frustration-free packaging program is meant to reduce wrapping for shipped products (better for the environment) and make them easy to open (better for you). But you can't assume that frustration-free packaging is always better, cheaper, or even different from the usual.

Some of Amazon's more than 100,000 frustration-free items have the same packaging whether bought from Amazon or elsewhere. The packaging simply meets the guidelines: It's easy to open, say, or recyclable. For other items, Amazon has worked with manufacturers to reduce packaging.

In online comments, some buyers have said that frustration-free packages didn't protect well enough. One said a computer hard drive

was packed so loosely that it arrived damaged, and a replacement showed up in the same condition. An Amazon spokeswoman said frustration-free items have undergone transit tests to ensure they're properly packaged and that Amazon works with manufacturers and shippers to resolve any issues.

Less packaging doesn't necessarily mean a lower cost. We shopped for three items on Amazon.com, comparing prices for the frustration-free and traditional packaging. In each case, the product sold by Amazon in frustration-free packaging was pricier.

Bottom line. If you want to make sure wrapping is truly frustration-free, call Amazon before you order and ask exactly how the product's packaging differs.



ILLOGICAL The box says "Certified Frustration-Free Packaging," but the recipient was annoyed: "A padded envelope would have worked fine."



Less filling

Most people wouldn't have noticed what Mel Kallal of West Monroe, La., saw right away: Pinnacle Foods shaved an ounce off its roast turkey dinner with all the fixings—and changed the words on the label from “Over 1 lb. of food” to “1 lb. of food.”

The company says With rising commodity costs, we chose to downsize rather than hike the price.



Shriveled raisins

Reader Pat Lehane, of Costa Mesa, Calif., didn't notice the difference between the new 6-pack and the one at home until she compared them. The new boxes were thinner and reduced from 1.5 ounces to 1 ounce, and the label's wording had changed from “100 calories or less per ounce” to “Less than 100 calories per box.” Lehane says, “I felt duped.”

The company says No response.



Shaving contents

Kathleen Kraemer, from Newton, Mass., saw that the old and new cans were identical in size. On the outside, that is. The contents had shrunk from 11 ounces to 10.

The company says (Our favorite response.) We are in no way trying to trick our customers. A slightly reduced product volume within our cans creates improved function from the very first shave, while continuing to deliver superior quality to the very last shave. Feedback also revealed that many consumers felt the longevity of our prior 11-ounce shave cream offering an average supply of four to six months was too long and often wasteful.



Overwrapped



Time to rewrap

“If you look closely, you will see a small plastic bag with two 13mm watchband pins,” says reader John Dugan of Millville, Mass., who received this box from Amazon. “Hey, a number 10 envelope and a stamp costs less than sending this FedEx.”

The company says We use a system that calculates the optimal box size based on the dimensions and weight of the item.

Breakable cloth?

Not taking any chances, Williams-Sonoma cradled its napkins with bubble wrap, placed them in a big carton, and shipped the order to readers Steve Fetter and Bonnie Kellogg in Nordland, Wash. Said Fetter: “When my wife opened the box, she never imagined all she would find inside were four cotton napkins.”

The company says When customers share their comments with us, they are forwarded to the appropriate department for later review so that new ideas and programs can be implemented if necessary.

