

# Creating More Sustainable Packaging

by Laurel Saville

Trends, information, expertise, new products and ideas on what exactly a designer can—and should—be doing

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According to Scott Ewen from Emigre, designers make the world's most beautiful trash.

Perhaps nowhere is this statement truer than when it comes to packaging. Fortunately, everyone from the retail behemoth Wal-Mart to start-up companies and boutique design shops are beginning to look for ways to reduce the volume of stuff we throw away. However, even the most green-sympathetic designer will quickly find there are no easy answers or quick fixes when it comes to sustainable packaging. Even defining the term poses difficulties. "What's a sustainable package?" asks Wendy Jedlicka, a teacher, graphic designer and certified packaging professional in Minneapolis. "That's

easy—it's no package at all. Once you embrace that reality and use it as your goal, you then begin to add on function as needed." As Jane Bickerstaffe of the Industry Council for Packaging and the Environment in the U.K. notes, "If we all kept a cow and grew vegetables in our backyards, we wouldn't need any packaging at all. The problem that's been raised in the public mind is they think packaging is something we don't want. But we have to think through what packaging really does for us." That includes protecting products in shipping, offering consumers information, providing a branding billboard and giving us a way to carry things home. So the question becomes not how to do away with packaging, but how to use less of the less-harmful stuff.

**B.T. McElrath**  
Packaging for B.T. McElrath Chocolatier uses a system to “maximize flexibility while minimizing waste. A printed paper strap secures the stock, unprinted boxes, [which] can be ordered as needed,”

says creative director John Moes of the firm John Moes Design. “By creating a system of independent components that, when assembled, become a unified whole, we reduce the waste and expense of an all-in-one unit.”

### THE 5 Rs

A designer can start by enlarging his concept of his role in the continuum of packaging decisions. “Designers have to realize that everything you create has a past, present and future,” points out Dion Zuess of ecoLingo, a green design studio in Phoenix, Ariz. To become more sustainable, designers must consider and improve each step along the entire product journey. John Moes, creative director at John Moes Design and member of The Mighty ODO—a loose collective of designers, writers, artists and others using all means creative to reconnect people with nature—says: “Packaging, like any other design problem, will need to be rethought with a sustainable systems approach.” Moes asks designers to “expand and evolve creative processes to include strategies like optimizing material and energy resources; sourcing materials that are produced responsibly with environmental best practices, fair labor and trade; choosing materials that are nontoxic, bio-based and made from renewable resources; and designing for resources recovery or reintegration back into nature after end use.”

These goals may seem lofty, but they’re so important that plenty of designers are working towards them. o2—a group of designers and others dedicated to fostering environmental sustainability—offers some practical advice: *Restore* by using materials and supporting firms that reduce or improve our natural capital; *Respect* what we have by examining all the impacts that packaging may have; *Reduce* the amount of materials, layers of packaging, weight of package, fuel used in transport, etc.; *Reuse* something that’s already been made, and make your package easy and desirable to reuse; and *Recover* the materials used through recycling, composting or reusing. While some of these steps are beyond a graphic designer’s control, doing something, anything, is important. “Designers can ask basic questions,” says Bickerstaffe, “such as: ‘Do you know where your paper is sourced? Can I make it lightweight? How can I make it fit more efficiently on a [truck]? Can we do this without a metal cap on the glass bottle because it makes it harder to recycle?’” After all, improving a small thing, many times, adds up to big effects.



## SUSTAINABLE SUBSTITUTES

One of the most important and simple ways a designer can move beyond conventional packaging solutions is to consider alternative materials. PLA (polylactic acid) is fast becoming the favored alternative to plastic. Clear so consumers can see the product and stiff enough to stand up to processing equipment, PLA is made from renewable resources such as corn, and uses fewer fossil fuels and generates fewer greenhouse gases in its production than traditional plastics and some other polymers. PLA can be composted. However, even this product has its detractors, who point out that huge amounts of petroleum-based fertilizers and gas-guzzling equipment are used in the production of those “natural” resources.

Fortunately, other materials are coming to commercial viability. Shannon Boase, president of Earthcycle Packaging in Vancouver, notes that “plastic has been around for 60 years, and it takes a long time to unseat the convenience and dependency that we’ve developed. Our idea of what packaging is and should do needs to change.” Her company is providing one such alternative. She discovered that palm-oil manufacturers were creating an enormous amount of waste as they harvested fruit. Surrounding the palm fruit is a “giant husk that looks like a hedgehog.” This husk is made of long-stranded virgin fibers that have the same tensile strength as titanium alloy. They can be steam cleaned, chopped, pulped and turned into slurry that can be molded or sheeted into effective packaging. Not only is this packaging making use of a waste product that would otherwise be burned, but it can be home composted. This is an essential difference—because PLA only breaks down with sustained moisture and high heat, it must be *industrial* composted; Earthcycle Packaging breaks down in the more variable conditions of the backyard pile.

One company that’s using the benefits of both PLA and other materials is Cargo Cosmetics. According to Hana Zalzal, president and founder, “We examined the standard lipstick case and asked ourselves, ‘How can this be better?’” Research led to a two-package, three-tiered solution. Their PlantLove line of lipsticks comes in a tube made of PLA and an outer carton made of biodegradable paper embedded with real flower seeds. Simply moisten the box, plant in the garden and watch your wildflowers sprout. In addition, a portion of the sale of each lipstick is donated to St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. “This lipstick case is, for us, a way of protesting against global warming and environmental issues,” notes Zalzal. Groovy graphics were an important part of delivering their message. “We were reminded of how, in the ’60s, people would take the time to protest. So we wanted the graphics to have that ’60s feel. Plus, a love-in kind of graphic seemed appropriate.”

## MARKETPLACE FOR SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

Another company that’s taking a holistic approach to sustainability is Distant Village Packaging in Chicago. When president Rich Cohen took a year off to travel the world, he discovered many skilled artisans along the way. When he returned to the States, he started a business selling handcrafted gifts. “My original goal was to preserve handmade crafts,” he says, “but then I decided this was not the best way to support the artisans. Even though we had great success, we were selling a dozen items at a time. Then we discovered the opportunity for using the same materials to make custom packaging.” His company now sells a variety of tree-free, handmade boxes, which are sustainable not just in materials, but also because “they’re so damn gorgeous, they won’t get thrown away. If you make something beautiful, it will get reused.” For Cohen, material choices are just the beginning. “We do our best to use environmentally conscious materials,” he says, “but that’s only part of our goal.” He’s preserving indigenous craft traditions by creating a marketplace for them. As these artisans make more money, they spend it in their own communities, which creates more economic growth in remote places. And as more parents are able to send their children to school, the cycle of opportunity and growth is furthered. However, he doesn’t wear much of this do-gooding on his sleeve. “Externally, you don’t feel any of that in our presentation and marketing,” he says. “All you see is a slick packaging design company that just happens to connect the richest classes with the neediest classes. It is ironic that we have vendors who don’t have shoes, and yet their artisan packaging is being bought at exclusive department stores by women wearing \$2000 shoes.”

## GOOD FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Because eco-design is good design, there is no need to overdo sustainable messages or overuse the tropes of green design. When Laurie Varga of Anatomy Communications in Toronto set out to create a marketing campaign for wine in a plastic, recyclable bottle, she intentionally did not mention the eco-benefits. “The packaging is lightweight, which reduces shipping space and weight,” she notes. “The bottle is shatterproof, and PET (polyethylene terephthalate) can be recycled into polar fleece, which makes it a *true* recycled product instead of a *downcyclable* product that loses quality each time it’s processed.” However, even with all these benefits, the marketing for the wine focused on convenience. “We had to keep the look and feel of this program sophisticated to reflect the quality of the product



### Cargo lipstick

PlantLove is the first biodegradable lipstick tube made entirely from corn. “Our manufacturer is Natureworks. What we loved about their product is that their PLA is greenhouse-gas-neutral,” says Hana Zalzal. The surrounding carton is made with biodegradable paper infused with wildflower seeds—just moisten and plant—and the lipstick itself is also environmentally friendly, without mineral oils or petroleum.

### Eco-Resources

The single most important thing an eco-minded designer can do is to get educated. Not only does this allow the designer to educate clients, but the field is always changing, new products are being produced, issues flux and materials come in and out of favor as more information becomes available. Here are a few resources that are chock-a-block with ideas and information:

**The Minneapolis College of Art and Design** offers a sustainable design program through online courses and workshops, [www.mcad.edu](http://www.mcad.edu)

**The AIGA Center for Sustainable Design** is dedicated to providing designers with a wide range of information regarding sustainable business practice, [www.sustainability.aiga.org](http://www.sustainability.aiga.org)

**The Sustainable Packaging Coalition** is an industry working group inspired by cradle-to-cradle principles and dedicated to transforming packaging into a system that encourages economic prosperity and a sustainable flow of materials, [www.sustainablepackaging.org](http://www.sustainablepackaging.org)

### Other websites with a wealth of background information:

[www.designcanchange.org](http://www.designcanchange.org)  
[www.environmentalleader.com](http://www.environmentalleader.com)  
[www.incpn.org](http://www.incpn.org)  
[www.o2-usa.org](http://www.o2-usa.org)  
[www.re-nourish.com](http://www.re-nourish.com)  
[www.themightyodo.com](http://www.themightyodo.com)  
[www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com)

### Designers who specialize in sustainable practices of all kinds:

[www.anatomycommunications.com](http://www.anatomycommunications.com)  
[www.ecolingo.com](http://www.ecolingo.com)  
[www.greendesigners.org](http://www.greendesigners.org)  
[www.jedlicka.com](http://www.jedlicka.com)

### Manufacturers and users of sustainable packaging:

[www.earthcycle.com](http://www.earthcycle.com)  
[www.cargocosmetics.com](http://www.cargocosmetics.com)  
[www.distantvillage.com](http://www.distantvillage.com)  
[www.natureworkspla.com](http://www.natureworkspla.com)



### Earthcycle Packaging

Shannon Boase, president of Earthcycle Packaging in Vancouver, holds the “waste product” that becomes Earthcycle Packaging. “It’s called an empty fruit bunch, and it looks like a hedgehog,” she says. “It’s a giant husk that covers palm fruit as natural protection against birds.” Farmers were burning the husks until Boase and company discovered it was made of very long, strong virgin fibers that could be cleaned, pulped and turned into packaging products that easily compost.

and reputation of the brand,” she says. “It was not targeted to tree huggers like myself.” And in spite of some long-held misconceptions, reducing packaging and making environmentally conscious choices need not be more expensive. Wal-Mart, for instance, is embarking on an ambitious plan to reduce packaging five percent by 2013 in expectation of saving billions of dollars.

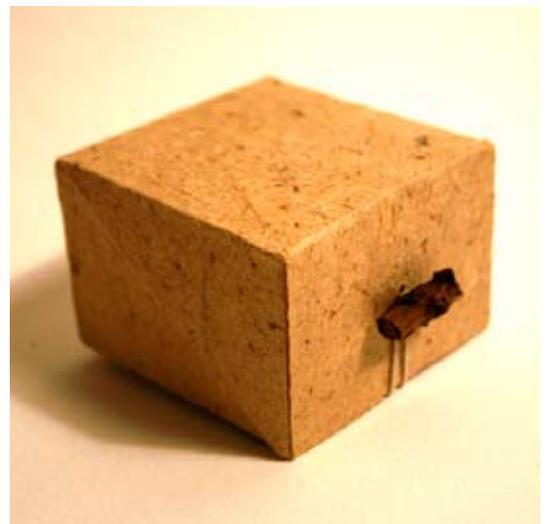
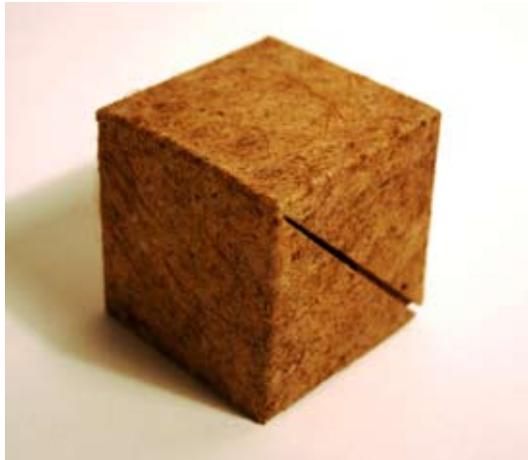
To make the most of sustainable packaging opportunities, designers need to do what they do best: Get creative. “People get stuck with ink,” notes Cohen. “There’s so many more ways to communicate through a package with shape, design, materials. When you see packaging from reclaimed banana fiber, that’s communicating something important about what’s inside the box.” Zuess says that if you forgo adhesives that may contain harmful, volatile organic compounds and can gum up recycling processes, you have the chance to utilize “... design elements that have some hand work, like grommets or swing tags.” She also suggests sourcing packages that will be kept and reused after their original contents are consumed, such as tin containers or collectible, recyclable glass jars. There are plenty of fun ideas to be found on Treehugger.com, which runs a regular best and worst

of packaging contest that solicits ideas from readers. Lush, a natural soaps and lotions manufacturer, makes news and extols the virtues of no packaging by having their retail staff work in the buff, covered by nothing more than an apron. Designer Olivia Cheung makes intricately cut light bulb packaging that doubles as a lantern. Finalist Tiffany Threadgould creates earrings from fruit Cheerios and packages them in repurposed cereal boxes. Yeo Valley Organic yogurt uses recycled cardboard to reinforce cups made from the thinnest possible polypropylene. Netflix saves money and resources while increasing convenience with their self-mailing, self-return-mailing, no-plastic-required CD packaging.

Designers must increasingly recognize that doing good for the planet is doing good for themselves. As Eric Benson, an educator at the University of Illinois and the keeper of the Re-nourish.com website, points out, “The long and short of it is that if designers don’t act more sustainably, they’ll destroy their professions. As designers, we help create everything. There’s nothing you can point to that isn’t designed or made, and if we go along the same path of designed obsolescence, we’ll just delete ourselves. The planet will not go away, but we will.” ☹

### Fiber boxes

Packaging from Distant Village uses agricultural products that would otherwise be discarded, including banana fibers from trunks and stems, as well as waste material gathered from forest floors. These papers are made without bleach, chemicals or artificial dyes, use alternative fuel sources, and their manufacture provides additional income for farm workers in remote villages. The materials used in making these boxes, from the upper left, clockwise, are: banana fiber aged for color, waste gathered from the forest floor, reclaimed banana fiber with a coconut button closure, and tree-free paper woven by hand through a loom.



Go ahead... drop me.



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**Wolf Blass**

Bilyara Reserve uses a lightweight, reduced size, PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottle, which reduces shipping weight and space. By focusing on convenience, the company's marketing efforts appeal to an audience of sophisticated wine drinkers who might not take environmental considerations into their purchase decisions. This ad won an award from *Food & Drink* magazine, "beating out hundreds of big budget campaigns," according to Laurie Varga of Anatomy Communications, proving again that "less is often more."



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