



A Qualitative Study of Grocery Bag Use in San Francisco

This summarizes the findings of a store check of San Francisco grocery outlets to determine the effects of the City's ban on traditional plastic bag dissemination.

Background

On November 20, 2007, the City of San Francisco banned the use of non-compostable plastic checkout bags in supermarkets and grocery stores doing at least \$2 million in annual sales. The Ordinance requires the use of recyclable paper bags; compostable plastic bags; or bags with handles specifically designed for multiple reuse, defined as durable plastic bags at least 2.25 mils thick. Further, under California AB 2449, stores in areas where plastic bags are banned are no longer required to recycle plastic bags, including dry cleaning bags, newspaper bags, and plastic films.

To determine the impact to date of the Ordinance, Robert Lilienfeld, President of The Cygnus Group and Editor of *The ULS Report*, traveled to San Francisco to observe store and customer bag usage and activity. A total of 25 retail stores were visited.

The Retail Environment

The store check encompassed all of the major retailers in the City. For reference, significant changes in food retailing have occurred here in the last 10 years. First, consolidation has reduced the variety of major outlets: Safeway purchased and assimilated Von's; and Kroger purchased both Fred Meyer and Ralph's and is operating mainly under the Foodsco and Cala names, respectively. Second, two "greener" retailers have created a reasonable presence in the market. Both Whole Foods and Trader Joe's have established themselves as viable alternatives to Safeway et al.

It should be noted that as in other big cities, independent food stores are a significant presence, serving local neighborhoods in which walk-in traffic and convenience are critical. Also, major drug chains such as Walgreens are both ubiquitous and competitive with traditional food retailers: Walgreens uses food to battle Safeway, which competes by offering pharmacy services, vitamins & supplements, and HBA products.

Methodology

Retail outlets were visited from September 14 to 17, 2008. Stores were walked through, store personnel were questioned, checkout activities were observed, and customers' bagging preferences were reviewed.

A total of 25 retail visits occurred, as shown below. This list represents many, if not most, of the retailers covered by the ordinance. It also represents a very significant percentage of retail volume in the City. (See the Appendix for store locations and observation notes.)

Safeway – 3 stores (All 3 in the City)

Kroger – 2 stores (Representing both Fred Meyer and Ralph's)

Whole Foods – 3 stores (All 3 in the City)

Trader Joe's – 1 store (The major store in the City)

Independents – 7 stores (1 large store, Harvest Urban Market, and 6 small "corner" stores)

Walgreens – 7 stores

Rite Aid – 2 stores

9/22/08

Findings

1. All food chains affected by the ordinance have switched back to paper bags, with none offering plastic of any type. In all cases, the only plastic bags present were those used for self-bagging of produce items.
2. Among drug store chains, Walgreens appears to be meeting the ordinance by offering paper bags or heavy HDPE plastic bags marked "REUSABLE" (see attached photo), while Rite Aid has switched completely to paper. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of Walgreens purchasers chose the plastic over the paper bags.
3. The number of consumers bringing their own bags was judged to be minimal, and not greater than in other cities. Very few people were seen bringing reusable bags to the stores, no more than the observer has seen being used in other metropolitan areas such as Detroit or Chicago.
4. Paper use was judged to be excessive. A significant amount of double bagging occurred, of which much was fostered by store employees. In many cases, baggers simply assumed that customers wanted bags doubled. This was especially true in Trader Joe's (see attached photos).
5. In some cases, plastic bag recycling bins have been removed. Only one of the three Safeway stores had a recycling bin. Employees in the other two stores said that the bins had been removed, but they did not know when or why. In all cases where bins were still available, they were not placed in easy-to-spot or use locations.

The one exception was Whole Foods, which had bins in all three stores, placed at the entrance. Unlike other grocery retailers, Whole Foods has turned its bins into a marketing advantage by creating a recycling display that positions the company as a concerned environmental citizen (see attached photo).

6. Even if bins were available, store employees were generally not aware of their presence or appropriate use. After being told that there was no available plastic bag recycling bin in one Safeway, this writer found it hidden in a far corner of the store (see attached photo). Interestingly, there were quite a few bags in it.

Employees in the two Kroger-owned stores stated that there were no bins, even though they were actually fairly well hidden in the front of the stores. (One employee told a customer to recycle her unwanted paper bag in the bin, even though it had large lettering stating "Plastic Bags Only" (see attached photo).

The Trader Joe's manager stated that there was no bin in his store, but he would be happy to put customer bags in his baler.

7. No compostable plastic bags were found. One independent store, Harvest Urban Market, gave out plastic bags labeled as “recyclable” and “100% Totally Degradable.” (The bag was made with TDPA from EPI.) Given the relatively large size of this store, it is suspected that the Ordinance is relevant but these bags do not appear to meet the requirement of being compostable (see attached photo).
8. Independents continue to offer primarily plastic bags. The reasons for doing so appear to be cost, reduced storage needs, convenience and customer preference.

Conclusions/Indicated Action

1. If reducing environmental impact is the objective of the Ordinance, results to date do not indicate it will be successful. First, little use of reusable bags was observed. Second, the replacement of plastic by paper and the return to double bagging may actually increase environmental impact, as many peer reviewed lifecycle studies indicate that paper bags use more energy, produce more waste, and generate more greenhouse gas emissions than do plastic bags. (See the ULS website at www.use-less-stuff.com for a review of these studies.)
2. Given the demand for recycled plastic combined with the desire of many consumers to help recycle, the State of California should consider revising AB 2449 to ensure the presence of plastic bag recycling bins in all larger stores, regardless of bans. The plastic bag recycling bins that were still available in San Francisco contained dry cleaning bags, produce bags, and bags from non-grocery retailers.

Based on this continued use of existing bins, there is still public desire to recycle plastic bags, and apparently awareness that it is valuable to do so. Given the fact that there is still significant usage of plastic bags in San Francisco among independent grocers and other retailers, these bins can help ensure that plastic recycling rates improve, and the volume of recycled material increases.



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