

End of plastic bag era means relearning some old skills

Some environmentally friendly merchants charge customers five cents for each plastic bag while others have stopped using them

BY CRAIG MCINNES, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 21, 2009

I'm learning to juggle.

This is not fulfilling a life-long fantasy of running off to join the circus.

I'm just trying to save a nickel.

That's how much I would have had to pay for a plastic bag to hold the half-dozen items I bought the other day at Home Depot.

Fortunately, nothing broke.

Risking my valuable purchases to save a nickel is, I admit, an irrational response to a small expense. But a little more than a month after the City of Toronto implemented a bylaw requiring merchants to charge a nickel for every plastic bag they hand out, it seems that I am not alone in my reaction.

Ears long deaf to the pleas of environmentalists have clearly heard the ring of the cash register. Retailers report a sharp increase in the number of people using cloth or reusing plastic bags.

Home Depot is one of a growing number of merchants elsewhere in Canada that aren't waiting for the ban-the-bag crowd to win the day at city hall to usher in a new era of shopping.

The merchants are gambling that their customers have become sufficiently concerned about the environment that they won't rebel at being forced to buy bags. It looks as if they are right, even though they are facing some resistance from cranky customers.

On Wednesday, Thrifty Foods, a B.C.-based supermarket chain that was taken over two years ago by Sobeys's Inc., is carrying through with a threat (or promise, take your pick) to stop using plastic bags.

The announcement was made on April 22, Earth Day, so there could be no mistake about the motivation. Nevertheless, Thrifty's president and CEO Milford Sorensen lamented last week in a full-page ad in the Victoria Times-Colonist that some customers have suggested the move is "merely an attempt to capture more revenue."

No so, says Sorensen. The decision was made after an exhaustive study that indicates "this is a step in the right direction and is, after all, the right thing to do."

Originally the right thing to do included charging 10 cents for paper bags that until now have been a free alternative. Last week, Sorensen has announced that paper will remain a free option. For now.

If you buy \$60 worth of groceries, you will get a free package of kitchen garbage bags. Plastic, of course.

While Thrifty's has pulled back slightly in response to consumer complaints, the end of free plastic bags is in sight if not yet here.

As a result we all have to learn new skills. Juggling is one that becomes important when you forget to bring in from the car one of the dozens of cloth bags that seem to be breeding behind the back seat.

Restraint is another. The truth is, I don't need a bag for the couple of items I buy at the drugstore or bakery.

Scrounging is a third. Boxes that are usually chopped up and recycled work pretty well for carrying home groceries.

What concerns me more is the old skills I'm going to have to relearn. As the pile of plastic shopping bags stuffed under my kitchen sink diminishes, where will I put my kitchen garbage?

Where will I find bags for the inevitable scoop that interrupts a walk with my niece's dogs?

The answer to kitchen garbage seems to be a combination of religiously composting and washing out the wastebasket as it starts to smell.

As for the dogs, without going into details, biodegradable plastic bags seem better suited to the task. And don't forget to flush.

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