Plastic Carryout Bag Ban

Retail business survey and six-month progress report

Seattle Public Utilities
Solid Waste Division
January 15, 2013
Groups and stores surveyed:

Stakeholders – e-mail sent to 86 major stores, trade associations and packaging distributors – 20 responses.

Retail store owners and managers – direct mail to 2,235 retail outlets – 74 responses.

80 in-person calls on managers at a representative sample of store types – 75 completed surveys.

Total responses: 169

Response rate = 7% overall; 3.3% by mail.

Survey dates: December 1-16, 2012
Types of stores responding:

- 57.9% (98)

More than 80% said they were “independent,” including 60% of grocery stores.
How store managers learned about the plastic bag ban.

- Almost two-thirds (66.1%) mentioned the letters from the city.
- Next came newspapers (28%);
- Followed by TV (23.8%).
- About one-fourth of grocery (25.9%) and department stores (23.5%) said they also got information from their corporate headquarters.
How they got the word out:

- Printed fliers to hand out
- Signs on doors or outside
- Other (please specify):
- Signs at checkout counter
- Did not use printed material. Clerks explained as needed.
Carryout bag use went down.

More than 80% reported that use was about the same (33.9%) or dropped (48.5%).
Estimates by store managers who said bag use dropped:

Sample includes 12 grocery stores reporting drops in total bags given out.
Estimates by store managers who said bag use increased:

Of small sample, including 5 grocery stores, most said increase was less than 20%.
Samples of the quantities:

Four grocery stores provided estimates:  
*Their combined bag use dropped almost 15,000 per month.*

Nine small retail stores provided estimates:  
*Typically, they reported monthly bag use drops of 50 to 200 per month each.*

(We can’t generalize from these numbers. The sample is too small and store types don’t correspond to business license data.)
Shoppers bring reusable bags.

More than half (53.5%) of grocery stores say 31% to 75% of their customers bring their own bags. (Shown in columns 4 and 5.)
The number of stores selling reusable carryout bags has remained constant.

- About one-third of stores sold reusable bags before the ban (32.9%).
- About one-third of stores do now (35.3%).
- But two-thirds of grocery stores sold bags before the ban and those stores still sell them (66.7%).
More stores report bag cost increases than decreases.

About one-third (31.9%) say bag costs are up, one-third about the same (31.3%) and one-fifth (20.5%) say costs are down.
Compliance strategies:

- Stopped providing customers with any kind of carryout bags: 4.8%
- Mostly using heavy-weight (2.25 mil or thicker) plastic bags as the low allo...: 7.8%
- Using heavy-weight (2.25 mil or thicker) plastic bags as the low allo...: 12.7%
- Still using up inventory of lightweight, single-use plastic bags: 15.1%
- Did not use the kind of bags that were banned, charge 5 cents for lar...: 15.7%
- No action was needed. Were not using (and still do not use) any light...: 17.5%
- Other (please specify): 19.3%
- Using only smaller paper bags so do not need to charge customers for ...: 24.1%
- Stopped using lightweight plastic bags and increased use of paper bag...: 32.5%
Questions managers had before the ban took effect.

Almost half fully understood the new law.
Problems stores encountered:
(On a scale of 1 to 4 from “Not a problem” to “Big problem.”)

- New employees need extra training: 1.17
- Longer checkout lines due to bag ban: 1.29
- Customers' reusable bags that store staff find unsanitary: 1.36
- Locating suppliers for the bags we need now: 1.41
- Increased Shoplifting due to bag ban: 1.54
- Identifying customers on state of federal food assistance who are ex...
- Customers who don't want to pay 5-cents for large recyclable paper bags: 2.2
33 of 169 added comments, 26 of them from small retail stores.

- **12** – bad idea
- **12** – charge discourages customers
- **8** – total cost of bags higher
- **8** – paper bags don’t protect from rain
- **6** – problem for tourists
- **5** – good idea
Other findings:

- Grocery stores are almost alone in giving credit (usually 5 cents) when customers bring their own bags.
- Quite a few stores are using 2.25 mil or thicker plastic bags, often charging 5 or 10 cents for bags of this type.
- Almost one-fifth (18.7%) of all stores charge for one kind of bag or another.
- We get calls and talk to shoppers who complain that stores are charging for all bags, blaming the City. (The legislation requires a 5-cent pass-through charge only for large-grocery size bags.)
Where we are so far:

Lightweight plastic carryout bags have been almost completely eliminated from the larger stores.

(Grocery, convenience and drug stores generate 70% of bags.)

One-third of stores report cost increases; one fifth report costs dropped.

A significant percentage of shoppers, particularly at grocery stores, are bringing their own reusable bags.

Smaller businesses continue to use up inventory; this is gradually ending.
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