

## Reusing Corrugated Cartons

If your business is like most, you're both *receiving* product in packaging from suppliers, and *buying* new packaging to ship product to your customers. Can the packaging "waste" that comes in be used one more time, before recycling? This strategy is called **reuse** and a growing number of businesses are discovering its benefits. Typically, reusing a box is even better than recycling it, both for financial and environmental reasons.

### **Reuse In-House**

The greatest financial benefits typically are found when businesses are able to reuse boxes themselves.

Some businesses are able to reuse cartons that their vendors have used to ship supplies or parts. This reduces the need (and cost) of purchasing new corrugated boxes.

If being re-used for shipping, cartons need to be free of address labels and other markings that could cause confusion during shipping. At least one company, Nike, has developed a [sticker](#) for its box reuse program. The sticker covers old address information and also informs customers that the box is being reused. There are also mask out paints available in both tan and white that can be used to cover old markings, although these paints may be flammable and respiratory irritants. In any case, boxes should not be re-used for shipment if they are printed with labels such as "hazardous", "flammable", etc.

The key to successful box re-use is to make it easy for order fulfillment center staff to choose reused boxes. Some companies put their empty, reusable boxes into bins or totes for transfer to the packing/shipping area. Order fulfillment staff are encouraged to pull from these areas first. Typically, boxes are not flattened, which then saves employees time in flattening boxes for recycling and setting up new boxes.

Some businesses distinguish between boxes reused for shipment to customers vs. boxes reused internally. Higher quality, "cleaner" boxes are used for customer orders. For internal or inter-company transfers, appearance and aesthetics is less important.

Other businesses have switched to packaging that is designed to be reused tens or hundreds of times, such as durable plastic totes. That kind of reusable transport packaging is profiled in a separate document ([click here](#)).

### **Case Studies**

Read how several Oregon businesses are saving money through carton reuse:

- The Portland order fulfillment center of [OfficeMax](#) reuses corrugated cartons from vendors and a large customer.
- The factory and order fulfillment program at [Rejuvenation](#) operates a successful box reuse program, where reused boxes are used for inter-company shipments, catalog fulfillment, and shipments to retail stores. Annual savings exceed \$22,000.

### **Reuse by Others**

Even if you can't re-use vendor packaging yourself, someone else may be able to... including your vendors! [Click here](#) for an example of how a Xerox facility worked with its vendors and a third-party packaging management company to implement a closed-loop reuse program for corrugated cartons.

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## **Materials Exchanges**

Materials exchanges are on-line services that make it easy for businesses with surplus or unwanted inventory to find other businesses (or individuals) who are looking for the very same material. A web portal to materials exchanges serving the Pacific Northwest is Northwest Materialsmart: [www.nwmaterialsmart.org](http://www.nwmaterialsmart.org).

## **Corrugated Cartons**

Some communities also have businesses that will redistribute used corrugated cartons that are in good condition. These businesses typically sell surplus boxes, and some also operate a box buy-back program, where used boxes in good condition are purchased for a percentage of the surplus selling price.

A McGary Boxes (Tualatin): (503) 657-4600  
Sells and buys reused boxes if in good condition and a standard size.

Boxes2Business (Clackamas): (888) 353-1854  
Sells pallet quantities of used boxes.

Boxes Barrels & Pallets (Beaverton): (503) 520-1536  
Sells and buys reused boxes if in good condition and a standard size and sufficient quantity.

Carton Service (Portland): (503) 227-6428  
<http://www.cartonserviceonline.com>  
Sells surplus boxes and also buys used boxes if in good condition and a standard size. Also sells reused expanded polystyrene foam, bubble wrap, and wadded paper.

You may find other companies under “Boxes-Used” or “Boxes-Corrugated & Fiber” in your telephone directory.

**Alternative formats** (such as large type, Braille) of this document can be made available. Contact DEQ’s Office of Communications & Outreach, Portland, at (503) 229-5317

## **“Reuse” and “Recycling”: What’s the Difference?**

To the casual observer, “reuse” and “recycling” may be the same. In fact, many people use the word “recycling” when talking about “reuse”. But from both a financial and an environmental standpoint, “reuse” and “recycling” are very different.

Take corrugated cartons for example. **Reuse** involves using the carton again *in its original form*, thus avoiding the need to purchase a new carton. In contrast, **recycling** involves sending old cartons to a paper mill, where they are pulped and used to make new products. Both activities reduce waste and can save money, but reuse is typically preferable. Like recycling, reuse saves money on disposal fees. But reuse also saves money as fewer new cartons have to be purchased.

Making a carton from recycled corrugated requires less energy and virgin resources compared to producing cartons entirely from wood. But reusing a carton means one less carton is produced entirely, with greater resource savings and pollution reduction benefits. That’s why both the EPA and the State of Oregon say that while recycling is good, reuse is often environmentally preferable: reuse first, *then* recycle.