

Shipping Bags for Non-Breakable Items

For direct-to-customer shipments of non-breakable items, shipping bags may be an attractive option to consider. Many leading retailers already use bags or other flexible packaging to ship clothing, linens, and other soft goods to customers via delivery services such as the USPS, FedEx, and UPS. In certain circumstances, shipping bags or flat mailers are also used for shipping certain office supplies and paper products, books, electronic media, and even mail-order pharmaceuticals.

Financial Considerations

Bags and flexible packaging offer the potential of several financial advantages to the order fulfillment center:

- **Procurement:** Shipping bags typically cost less than corrugated boxes and void fill.
- **Storage:** Bags store more compactly, requiring less storage space.
- **Labor:** Bags can be easier to use, avoiding the time spent setting up, stuffing, and taping shut boxes. Norm Thompson Outfitters found that an average order packer can fill 32% more orders per hour using bags instead of boxes.
- **Outbound Freight:** Shipping bags usually weigh less than boxes with void fill, and thus offer the potential for savings in shipping charges.

Norm Thompson estimates that it saves more than \$1.1 million and reduces packaging use by more than 600 tons annually through its use of shipping bags for fulfilling clothing orders from customers. [Click here](#) for details.

Of course, bags and other flexible packaging are not appropriate for shipping items that need additional protection, including items that are fragile, breakable, bruisable and items with sharp edges or protrusions. Using a bag to ship fragile items may increase expenses and waste, if the product is damaged and has to be replaced. In these instances, a rigid package such as a corrugated carton is likely a better choice.

Material Options

There are many different types of shipping bags and envelopes to choose from. Variables include the following:

- Padded or unpadded. The most common types of padding are polyethylene foam, polyethylene bubble, and macerated newsprint.
- Paper, plastic, or composite (paper/plastic blend).
- Rigid or flexible. While most shipping bags are flexible, some envelopes are made from thick chipboard that is rigid and holds its shape under moderate pressure.
- One-way or two-way mailer. Some shipping mailers have a peel-off tab and adhesive strip that allow the mailer to be used for returns.
- Generic or custom-printed. Stock shipping bags are available in a limited variety of colors. Some retailers purchase custom-printed shipping bags with their corporate logo and/or colors printed on the bags.
- Level of post-consumer recycled content. Increasing post-consumer content can reduce several environmental burdens associated with manufacturing the shipping bag.

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Environmental Considerations

Shipping bags typically offer several environmental advantages over corrugated cartons. Because they typically weigh so much less, fewer raw materials and energy are required in manufacturing, and associated air and water emissions are reduced. Shipping bags' smaller volumes and weight also reduce fuel use and associated emissions when packaged products are shipped to customers.

[One study](#) compared ten different shipping bags against two different corrugated boxes with eight different void fills each. It found that all of the shipping bags – even those made entirely from virgin materials and with limited recycling options – required less energy over their entire life cycle than any of the box/void fill options. Similar results were found for most of the atmospheric and waterborne emissions studied. This isn't to say that recycled content and recyclability aren't important – they are, and the Oregon DEQ encourages recycling and use of recycled content in packaging materials. Rather, the study found that the lower weight and volume of the shipping bags more than compensated, in terms of raw materials use and most emissions, for the bags' typical lack of recycled content and recyclability.

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