



When Packaging Packs a Punch

The Packaging Dilemma
 Executives at Bethesda's Honest Tea ask: Glass or plastic? D4

Honest Tea Tries to Minimize Waste; Even Has Juice Bags Used as Pencil Pouches

By MICHAEL S. ROSENWALD
 Washington Post Staff Writer

At Honest Tea, the Bethesda organic-beverage company, sustainability is a way of life. Employees ride company-purchased bikes to work, where they hustle around atop bamboo floors and sit at desks that were purchased brand-spanking used.

The product they sell — organic iced tea, with a hint of sweetness — grows in a rigorously sustainable garden in India. After the company brews the tea in the United States, the leaves are turned to mulch. Soon the leaves will also be fed to cows in Virginia.

"We feel very good about the life cycle of our ingredients," said Seth Goldman, the company's co-founder and chief executive.

And yet there is this not-so-little issue: the bottles. "It's a big issue," Goldman said. "The packaging is a real thing. It's still flawed."

As more Americans go green, debates are fermenting over packaging: plastic vs. paper at the grocery store, plastic vs. glass for beverages. The packaging issue perplexes Goldman. So far, he is agnostic on the issue.

"I can see the merits of both," Goldman said. "If I didn't believe in one of the products, I wouldn't make it."

He and his company, which employs 60 people, live by the mantra "reduce, reuse, recycle," and Goldman has studied how his products can fit into each of those efforts, traveling around the country to packaging conferences and product expos.

"If you can reduce your package, that's what you should do first," Goldman said.

That's where the plastic bottles come in. Made of PET plastic, which can be recycled only once — or made into carpet or clothing — the bottle's liquid weight is 512 grams while its package weight is 42.2 grams. That means 92.4 percent of the weight comes from the product.

"That's a very good ratio," Goldman said.

The total weight of Honest Tea's plastic bottle is seven times lighter than its glass bottle, meaning the company can fit more of the plastic product onto shipping trucks, which operate under stringent weight restrictions. About 2,100 cases of glass product can travel on a truck. That number jumps to nearly 2,700 for plastic.

"The PET is more efficient to move around," Goldman said. The only problem is that the fuel saved by shipping more product on one vehicle is somewhat offset by the petroleum used to make the plastic.

The primary advantage of glass comes in the recycling: Glass can be made into new glass over and over again. "People feel glass is more natural," Goldman said.

Glass, Plastic or Aluminum?

Lightweight plastic bottles are more efficient to ship than glass bottles, because the liquid inside the plastic bottle constitutes a higher percentage of the total weight. But glass can be recycled more times than plastic.



Seth Goldman, founder and chief executive of Honest Tea at his Bethesda office. Honest Tea makes bottled organic tea using sustainable techniques.

But as the company rapidly expands from natural food stores to places such as Wal-Mart and gas stations, the most dominant form of packaging it will use is plastic. For storage reasons, mainstream, high-volume stores prefer unbreakable materials to glass.

"Whatever the consumer wants, we're going to sell them as long as we believe there is merit," Goldman said.

Honest Tea recently ran into a problem with its newest product: juice-bag drinks for children. (Think Capri Sun, with half the sugar.) The aluminum used by its packager on the bottom of the juice bag made the product unrecyclable. Honest Tea homed in on reuse instead. It formed a program with more than 500 collection sites to gather the bags from children. Honest Tea is paying schools 2 cents for every juice bag sent back to the company.

One of Honest Tea's partners is stitching together the juice bags to make school-supply pouches that will be sold exclusively through a major retailer, which Goldman would not identify. Such is the new circle of life in the green economy: The product comes back, and then it is sold as something else.

The only problem is the pouches probably can't be reused again once they are finished holding pencils. Hello, landfill. "We've made some progress," Goldman said, "but there's no end to this."



"It's a big issue. The packaging is a real thing. It's still flawed," Goldman says of the packaging dilemma.

Product (material)	Bottle (glass)	Bottle (PET plastic)	64-ounce bottle (PET plastic)	Kid's pouch (aluminum)
Liquid weight	461.45 grams	512 grams	1,901.79 grams	205.1 grams
Package weight	233.79 g*	42.2 g*	81.05 g	5.63 g*
Total weight	695.24 g	554.2 g	1,983 g	210.73 g
Weight proportion	66.4 percent liquid	92.4 percent liquid	95.9 percent liquid	97.3 percent liquid

SOURCE: Honest Tea *Includes straw