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Workshop Touts Benefits of Reusable Packaging for Drinks, Produce and More

By [Jonathan Bardelline](#)
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OAKLAND, CA — Before soda companies started using those ever-present plastic crates for shipping around 2-liter bottles, they would pack their products in cardboard.

That process had a number of downsides that weren't quite realized until a better solution was found. Up throughout the 80s, companies were packaging 2-liters in cardboard, eight bottles to a box, which cost .50 each.

Packaging companies started proposing reusable containers to use in place of the cardboard boxes, and although each reusable cost \$2.50,

companies that switched to them experienced a payback of less than two year, said Jon Kalin, agriculture sales and marketing manager for [Rehrig Pacific](#).

Kalin relayed that story as one of many examples of how reusable packaging has made its way into companies large at small during today's "Improving Your Business Through Reusable Transport Packaging" workshop in Oakland.

The event, hosted by the [StopWaste Partnership](#) and [Reusable Packaging Association](#) (RPA), which Rehrig Pacific is a member of, attracted a range of businesses from around the Bay Area, from packaging designers to medical equipment suppliers to sporting good retailers.

In the case of reusable containers for 2-liter bottles, Rehrig Pacific did a five year analysis of one Pepsi vendor that was shipping 2 million cases annually. The switch paid for itself in less than two years, yielded a net present value of \$836,000 and a return on investment of almost 300 percent.

The switch also led to labor reductions (taking bottles out of the crates is quicker than from boxes, and in some cases the crates are used to display the products), safety improvements (workers no longer has to continually bend over and cut open box after box), reduced damage to labels and eliminated trips to balers for crushing boxes. By making it easier and quicker for workers to get their jobs done, there's fewer stockers or cardboard waste in the way of customers.

The switch also led to similar benefits in manufacturing plants. With cardboard, if a bottle leaked, it could ruin other boxes and causes pallets to collapse. With plastic containers, that's not a danger.

Since 1999, the RPA has been touting the benefits of using reusable crates, containers and other shipping methods. The StopWaste Partnership has been trying to bring reusables to the local level in Alameda County since 2007, hoping to show everyone from small individual businesses to stores in national chains how they can benefit.

Another area the RPA and its members have made headway is with packaging for transporting fruits and vegetables.

Like with sodas, the standard for the longest time was - and generally still is - cardboard boxes. But in the case of comparing cardboard boxes and reusable crates for produce, the costs are much more similar.

Dave Rodgers, vice president and general manager of returnable plastic container maker [ORBIS Container Services](#), explained how [Walmart](#) started trialing returnable containers in the 90s primarily to reduce labor. By using reusable containers, stores could just take the crates of produce off of pallets and put them right on display.

Smaller retailers, though, didn't want to do the same thing because they didn't want to look like big box stores, he said, but reusable makers showed that the smaller businesses could reap the same benefits by using the reusables to transport goods around, and then easily unpack them when stocking their stores.

There are now some 30-40 million returnable plastic containers in circulation in 11 sizes, with four major retailers, including Walmart and [Kroger](#), and plenty of more stores testing them out.

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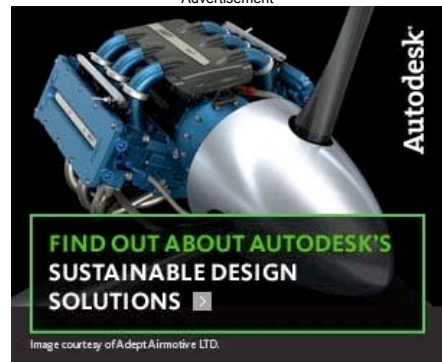
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"The dominoes are starting to fall," Rodger said. "To implement it, it's not quite as difficult as we once thought it was...Our challenge now is keeping pace with demand."

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