

Out with packaging, in with loose

by Sabine Eiche

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Nowadays, many supermarkets offer customers a range of unpackaged foodstuffs in what they call the bulk food section. That name, however, is a misnomer because bulk – from the Old Icelandic “bulki,” meaning cargo, heap, large quantity – properly identifies the kind of retailing done by a store like Costco, where large quantities are purchased at a discount.

Selling foodstuffs and other merchandise to the consumer in an unpackaged form – that is, loose – was the traditional way of retailing before packaging became a major industry. In antiquity, when oil or wine was transported, it wasn't packaged, it was contained in amphorae. Dry goods were transported in baskets or cloth sacks. Classical Latin didn't have a word for package. The source is “paccagium,” an Anglo-Latin term not documented before the 13th century.

Look at early images of stores. What you see is a clerk behind a counter, fetching, measuring or weighing what the customer requests and handing it over in the appropriate wrapping or container.

By the time my parents and I arrived in Canada, in 1956, many things, particularly foodstuffs, were already prepackaged. A few decades ago, so-called bulk food – loose, for self-service – was reintroduced in supermarkets, especially those that vaunted their money-saving policies. The logical assumption was that the environment would benefit from less trash and the consumer would save by not having to pay for packaging.

But listen to this. Last week I wanted to buy baking soda in a local supermarket and compared the bulk price with that of the packaged product – in bulk it costs \$3.20 the kilo, but a one-kilo Arm & Hammer package costs \$3.18. Then I checked icing sugar. One kilo from the bulk section costs \$3.90, whereas one kilo prepackaged sells for \$2.95. So who's doing the saving here?

Another puzzling aspect to the bulk food story is that prices for the same items differ greatly from store to store. I made a list of the cost of sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, flax and rolled oats, all organic. Two large supermarkets in Richmond charge more for these than does a small, upscale supermarket in Vancouver. In one instance the difference was more than five dollars the kilo.

And here's a further puzzle – why, in spite of the availability of so-called bulk food, are we still being swallowed alive by the packaging we throw out? In 2008, Canada produced nearly 2 million tons of it.

Couldn't we extend the concept of selling in "bulk" – that is, loose – to other sectors? It worked before. Why can't it work again?

Perhaps the packaging industry balks at the idea of "bulk"? It's true that packaging is a vital force in marketing. But when it comes to dry merchandise – hardware, for instance – instead of selling items in fingernail-breaking containers, why not sell them loose and pack them in paper bags (from recycled paper) printed with the product logo and information otherwise found on the packages?

Paper bags would be an even more effective marketing tool than packaging by offering longer exposure to the advertisement. After all, packaging supposedly gets thrown out. Paper bags supposedly get reused. I'm all for going loose!