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## Not just paper or plastic: Demand grows for reusable shopping bags

Reusable shopping bags have become hot sellers in Corridor stores as more consumers question the reams of plastic they accumulate on shopping trips.

Bag companies with environmental messages are springing up, and the Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center in Hiawatha will launch a big marketing campaign April 8 to persuade consumers to change their disposable ways.

Joan Burns, a mother and part-time junior high school teacher from Iowa City, has sold more than 6,400 heavy-duty reusable canvas shopping bags in Iowa grocery stores and drugstores in less than a year. Burns started a part-time business, Cart by Cart, to market the bags in July 2007.

Burns said she's hardly making anything on the bags, which cost \$4.99 to \$5.99 depending on the location. The bags have the message "doing our part, cart by cart," and various store or state logos.

"I'm trying to be a good influence on my students and my own kids and say, 'You can have an influence on social change,'" Burns said.

Sue Millar of Cedar Rapids opened an online shopping bag company, Choose Cloth, this month. The business sells American-made bags made from recycled cloth with artistic designs such as colorful ears of corn in pop art style. They cost about \$10, and Millar markets their attractiveness as one of the features that will make shoppers want to carry them. **Hot sellers** Hy-Vee has had a hard time keeping a new line of small reusable bags costing less than \$2 in stock at its stores in Iowa, according to spokeswoman Chris Friesleben. She said reusable canvas bags like those from Cart by Cart also are strong sellers.

Some Hy-Vee stores offer shoppers a small discount when they bring their own bags. The decision to offer discounts is made at the store level, Friesleben said. **Ready for change** Millar believes many Americans have a sense of responsibility for their natural environment that has grown with the understanding of issues such as climate change and petroleum depletion. Those consumers are looking for places where they can start to make a difference through their own actions.

That view seems to be widely held among those leading the charge against disposable bags.

"We think people are ready to make that change," said Sue Davis Smith, marketing coordinator for the Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center.

She said Prairiewoods has found that a growing number of retailers sell reusable bags and encourage their use. It also has identified some retailers that require consumers to put merchandise in their store bags, and hopes the campaign will help change their thinking.

The campaign slogan: "Fantastic: It's Not Plastic! — Keep Cedar Rapids Plastic Bag Free."

Prairiewoods plans to create a page on its Web site for participants to pledge to go bag-free, and will seek reusable bags to distribute free at food banks and farmers markets. **Global movement**

The anti-bag movement is increasingly global. China made headlines in January when it banned free plastic shopping bags in its war against "white pollution." The country is trying to improve its environmental image in the run-up to the Summer Olympic Games that it will play host to this year.

Ireland passed a tax on disposable shopping bags in 2002 in a bid to curb pollution and waste. Irish who want a bag at checkout must pay 33 cents per bag at the register. Disposable bag use plummeted more than 90 percent within weeks after the law took effect, according to press accounts from Ireland.

San Francisco passed a law in March 2007 to ban plastic checkout bags in order to reduce the estimated 180 million bags that

are distributed each year in that city alone.**Local waste**

Plastic bags and other plastic packaging made up more than 10,200 tons of waste dumped in Linn County in 2006, according to Stacie Johnson, education coordinator for the Cedar Rapids/Linn County Area Solid Waste Agency. At current market rates of \$125 to \$150 per ton for recycled plastic, she says consumers sent about \$1.275 million worth of plastic to be buried each year and paid about \$357,000 to get rid of the plastic.

The bags don't decompose once they are buried, and have become arguably the worst form of litter, Johnson said.

Prairiewoods' Smith calls the plastic bags "urban tumbleweeds."

"You see them everywhere — stuck in the bushes, on the trees and in the fences," she said.**Recycling plastic**

Although the solid waste agency supports reusable shopping bags, its main message is that dumping plastic bags in the landfill should be a last resort. Virtually all the plastic bags could be recycled at the landfill or a retail store that accepts them.

City Carton Recycling, which buys disposable bags for recycling in the area, ships them to companies that make them into composite lumber used for outside decks and staircases, according to Brian Holtz, vice president of sales and marketing. He described the market for the used bags as "strong."

Johnson said the worst problem with reusable shopping bags is that consumers often forget to bring them.

One of the best solutions Johnson has heard came from a woman who said she simply retrieves a disposable bag from the store's recycling bin.

"I'm sure the retailers don't mind," he said.

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