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McDonald's (B1): The Clamshell Controversy

The Joint Task Force of McDonald's Corporation and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) was in its third month of collaboration when a decision needed to be made about the expansion of McDonald's polystyrene recycling program. The task force, formed through a mutual agreement between the parties, had been charged with finding ways to reduce McDonald's solid waste through source reduction, reuse, recycling, and composting. However, one aspect of McDonald's operations seemed to attract the public's attention - the polystyrene "clamshell" sandwich containers. Although these packages represented only a minute fraction of total municipal solid waste, to the public they symbolized the "throw-away" society.

The debate over McDonald's packaging materials started in the 1970s when the public became concerned that too many trees were being cut down to make packaging. In response to this interest, Ray Kroc, McDonald's founder, commissioned the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) to conduct an environmental impact study comparing the paperboard packaging McDonald's was then using with the polystyrene packaging. By analyzing all aspects of the two alternatives from manufacturing through disposal, SRI concluded that plastic was preferred. They reasoned that the coating on the paperboard made it nearly impossible to recycle, while polystyrene was recyclable and used less energy in production.

As a result, McDonald's switched to polystyrene for their cups and sandwich containers, and launched an environmental education program to communicate to the public their rationale for the switch from paperboard to plastic. In 1989, McDonald's piloted a recycling program in 450 of their New England restaurants by asking in-store customers to sort their trash into designated trash bins. The polystyrene was then shipped to one of eight plastic recycling plants formed in a joint venture of eight plastics companies. The program achieved enough success and it was soon expanded to California and Oregon at the request of state officials, and involved a total of 1,000 stores. At this point, McDonald's began planning a national expansion of the program. However, EDF Director Fred Krupp told Ed Rensi, Chief Operating Officer and President of McDonald's USA, that he would publicly refuse to endorse the recycling program, because he did not regard it as the best environmental solution.

Packaging in the Waste Stream

Packaging is essential to a product's performance. It protects the product throughout production, distribution and storage, provides consumers with product and usage information, and differentiates the product. Food manufacturers and distributors also expect packaging to extend the product's shelf life and to preserve the appearance, freshness, flavor, and moisture content of food. Effective packaging reduces food spoilage-rates and diverts more than its own weight from disposal.



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