

case 1-428-687
January 1995

McDonald's (B2): The Decision

On November 2, 1990, McDonald's announced its decision to replace the polystyrene clamshell sandwich packaging with a paper-based "quilt-wrap" that was expected to reduce the volume of its packaging by 90 percent. Representatives also stated that the production process used to make the new wraps would result in reduction of energy consumption, air emissions, and water pollution. Burger King and Wendy's do not use polystyrene for their sandwich wraps; Burger King uses polystyrene only for coffee cups and has even begun to phase out this use.

EDF's January membership newsletter reported the news of McDonald's switch from clamshells, calling it a "major victory for environmentalists." However, it referred to the quilt-wrap replacement an "interim step." EDF scientist and task force member Richard Denison was quoted as saying, "There's no question that paper has its own environmental problems. We're looking at other changes to reduce the impacts of the switch to paper" (e.g., using recycled or unbleached paper).

The press responded with mixed reviews of the decision. *The New York Times* story covering the decision ran a headline, "Packaging and Public Image: McDonald's Fills a Big Order." The *Chicago Tribune* ran an article saying McDonald's was "a lesson in environmental progress." The *New York Times* hailed the "Greening of the Golden Arch" saying that "McDonald's is at last showing some McSense on the environment." However, *Adweek's Marketing Week* accused McDonald's of "flip-flopping" again. And the *Los Angeles Times* said, "I guess the environmentalists won't be satisfied until McDonald's slaps the burger directly onto our outstretched hand. If it is a burger, an agreement with the animal-rights movement may be next. Anyone for McTofu?"

A November 26, 1990, *Los Angeles Times* article called for government to set standards, practices, and definitions for recycling and incineration. Commenting on the assumptions underlying the decision to phase out the clamshells, the authors said that McDonald's "found itself doing the wrong thing for the wrong reason."

As part of McDonald's polystyrene recycling test conducted in New England, McDonald's supplied refuse to an industry-sponsored recycling center that was in the process of building plants in several cities. A spokesman for the center said that McDonald's decision would not change its plans to build the plants, but added, "The chief loss is [McDonald's] as an educational resource."



Published by GlobalLens, a division of the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan.

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