

Reducing the Distribution of Single-use Shopping Bags:

A Resource Guide for BC Retailers





Table of Contents

Why Reduce the Distribution of Single-use Shopping Bags?	1
Reducing the Distribution of Single-use Shopping Bags	2
Introduce a Fee	2
Offer a Reusable Bag	2
Provide In-store Recycling	3
Develop a Communications Strategy	3
Develop a Training Program	3
Develop a Green Program	3
Creating a Single-use Bag Reduction Program	4
Staff Training	5
Sourcing a Good Reusable Bag	6
Promoting Proper Bag Recycling	7
Appendix A - Single-use Bag Reduction Plans	8
Single-use Bag Reduction Plan	8
Single-use Bag Elimination Plan	9
Appendix B – Templates for Signage and Till Stickers	10
Appendix C – Sample Scripts for Training Staff on Customer Interaction	11-12
Appendix D - Endnotes	13



Why Reduce the Distribution of Single-use Shopping Bags?

Canadians use somewhere between nine billion and 15 billion plastic bags every year, enough to circle the Earth more than 55 times if tied together¹. Over two million plastic shopping bags are disposed of in the garbage every week in the City of Vancouver, with 63% of them having been re-used for garbage and pet waste². The manufacture and transportation of plastic bags consume significant amounts of non-renewable resources and they are not bio-degradable. We do not know for sure how long plastic bags will take to break down. Scientists fear they will accumulate in marine and terrestrial environments and pose a threat to marine and terrestrial animals³. A recent study estimates that if the growth of worldwide dumping of plastics in the oceans continues unchecked by 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean by weight than fish⁴.

A possible alternative might be to use paper bags which are recyclable. However, paper bags require more energy to manufacture and transport and consume trees when made partially or completely from non-recycled paper. Several life cycle studies have concluded that paper bags have higher global warming potential and consume more energy, water and non-renewable resources to manufacture and transport than single-use plastic bags. For example, it takes 14 million trees to make the 10 billion paper grocery bags used by Americans each year and paper bags require four times as much energy to manufacture as plastic bags^{5,6,7}.

Concern about the environmental impact of single-use shopping bags has led to several municipalities introducing or examining bans on plastic shopping bags, including the City of Victoria⁸, the City of Vancouver⁹ and the City of Halifax¹⁰. A 2012 poll by Angus Reid found that 53% of Canadians supported charging for plastic shopping bags¹¹.

A proactive way to respond to these concerns is to reduce how many single-use shopping bags are distributed by retailers and to maximize the reuse and recycling of those that are taken away by customers.

This guide offers advice for retailers based on best practices for:

- Reducing or eliminating the distribution of single-use shopping bags
- Creating a single-use bag reduction plan, including a plan template
- Training your staff, including a sample script
- Sourcing a good reusable bag
- Promoting proper plastic bag recycling
- Designing visual tools for customer communication – templates of example signs and till stickers





Reducing the Distribution of Single-use Shopping Bags

A review of best practice in the retail industry shows that to effectively reduce the distribution of single-use shopping bags in your store(s) you will need an integrated approach:

- Introduce a fee for single-use bags, whether plastic or paper
- Offer a reusable bag to your customers
- Provide in-store recycling for plastic single-use bags
- Develop a communications strategy for your customers
- Develop a training program for your staff
- Develop a green program for your store

Offering your customers a way to recycle their bags and giving them a choice to use them again or opt for reusable bags will help to improve your store's public image and provide better customer service.

You may also wish to consider reducing the distribution of other single-use items such as disposable cups and take-out food containers if these are used by your business. The City of Vancouver has been working on a strategy to reduce their distribution as well as that of single-use shopping bags. More information may be found on their website¹².

Introduce a Fee

Introducing a nominal fee of 5¢ - 10¢ per bag for single-use bags has been found to be very effective by many retailers. Major national retailers have reported reduction in the order of 50% to 80% following the introduction of a 5¢ fee per bag^{13,14}. Higher fees have been shown to be even more effective in reducing distribution of single-use bags. For example, Ireland has achieved 96% reduction with a government mandated fee of €0.22 (about CDN \$0.33)¹⁵.

Offer a Reusable Bag

A key element of a single-use bag reduction program is offering your customers the option of purchasing reusable bags. This is convenient for them if they don't have one already, don't have enough for all their purchases or have forgotten their reusable bag. It also provides an opportunity for you to have a branded bag that increases visibility for your store in a positive way. However, it is best practice to charge a high enough fee for reusable bags to avoid them being treated like single-use bags, and also to avoid shifting the problem to textiles or non-recyclable materials. Reusable bags are typically priced in the \$1-2 range. For information on selecting a reusable bag to offer in your store see the section entitled "Sourcing a Good Reusable Bag".

Provide In-store Recycling

Another best practice is to provide in-store recycling for single-use plastic bags which are not typically accepted in curbside residential recycling (“blue box”) programs although they can be brought to Recycle BC depots. This offers additional convenience for your customers. The recycling bins should be located near the front of the store in a highly visible location with appropriate signs to let your customers know they can bring their plastic bags here. Single-use paper bags can be recycled in curbside or multi-family collection programs with mixed paper so it’s not as important to offer in-store recycling for paper bags.

To provide this option, you will need a contract with a recycling collection provider to collect and manage the returned plastic bags. Contact several recycling collection providers to discuss the options they offer for recycling soft plastics to evaluate whether in-store recycling is feasible for your store. Note that Recycle BC only collects plastic bags from residents; businesses must make collection arrangements with a recycling collection provider.

Develop a Communications Strategy

It’s vital to develop a communication program to let your customers know about your single-use bag reduction program. Best practice is to let them know well in advance that it’s coming and why. This can be done via your regular customer communication channels such as your website, direct email or social media. Once it’s in place, keep communicating with them about it. One good way is to have signage at the entry points to your store. Some retailers with sound systems use brief (30-60 seconds) “spots” to update customers in-store on their reduction program. Another effective element is to have a “bag-free” week to kick off your reduction program.

Develop a Training Program

Be sure to develop a training program for your staff so that they understand the program and can explain it to your customers. This is discussed in more detail in the section entitled “Staff Training”.

Develop a Green Program

Finally, some retailers have developed sustainability (“green”) programs to reduce waste and the environmental impact of the products they offer. Best practice here is to invest the fees you charge for single-use bags in maintaining and improving your sustainability program. If you have a reward or loyalty program, you may wish to develop an incentive for customers bringing their own bag as part of that program. One national drugstore chain uses the bag fee to cover bag costs and to help support their recycling programs¹⁶.





Creating a Single-use Bag Reduction Program

There are two options for reducing the distribution of single-use bags:

1. A single-use bag reduction program; and,
2. Eliminating single-use bags and offering only reusable bags.

You will have to decide what makes the most sense for your customers and your stores.

A national Canadian retailer eliminated single-use bags ten years ago. The executive team had adopted a strategic objective of eliminating waste in their store operations. Phasing out single-use bags was part of the plan to do so. They switched from using biodegradable bags to selling reusable bags for a modest price. During a short transition period, they continued to offer single-use biodegradable and paper bags only if a customer specifically requested them. Once supplies of the single-use bags were exhausted, only reusable bags were available. Customers also had the option of taking a cardboard box or a plastic bag used for bulk delivery of clothing items from recycling bins at store exits to use to carry their purchases home. Ten years later the program is considered a complete success. The majority of their customers are now accustomed to bringing their own bag if they feel they will need one¹⁷. Other major retailers have also adopted this policy^{18,19}.

For both options, careful planning is essential for creating a successful reduction/elimination program. The following steps are recommended:

1. Identify a champion within your senior management for the program. Their support will be essential for ensuring that adequate funding and human resources are made available for successful implementation of the program.
2. Identify a leader for developing and implementing the reduction/elimination program; choose team members.
3. Establish the objectives of your plastic bag reduction/elimination program.
4. Develop a plan using one of the templates in Appendix A.
5. Make a public commitment to implementing the plan.
6. Implement the plan.
7. Monitor the results of implementing the plan.

Sample plans for both options may be found in Appendix A.

Templates for signs and stickers may be found in Appendix B.





Staff Training

Training staff members on the reasons for and objectives of the single-use bag reduction program is a vital component of the program. They are the people who are directly interacting with your customers. So, it is essential for them to understand why it is important and what they can do to encourage customer participation. See Appendix C for some sample scripts that could be used in staff training.

It is also important for staff to be trained on the proper use of bags. Educating employees not to double-bag groceries and to increase the number of items in each bag will reduce the number of bags used. Purchased items come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and weights. Some items should never be bagged; other items come with ready to carry packaging that reduces the need for a bag. When properly filled, bags can carry more items without breaking. Below are 10 proper bagging tips²⁰.

Tips for proper bagging:

1. Ask "Do you need a bag?". If the answer is yes, mention that reusable bags are available for purchase.
2. Don't bag large bulky items.
3. Eliminate double bagging.
4. Build a sturdy base.
5. Secure "crushable" items.
6. Pack like items together.
7. Isolate certain items.
8. Fill space with small items.
9. Fill out the bag properly.
10. Use the right size bag.



Sourcing a Good Reusable Bag

Things to keep in mind when sourcing a good reusable bag:

1. Choose a bag made from recycled materials.
2. Choose a bag that is lead free – in 2011 the Sierra Club reported that a number of major US retailers had been found to be distributing reusable bags with lead levels in excess of 100 ppm, the legal level for heavy metals in most US states²¹.
3. If the bag will be used for food, choose one that is washable.
4. If you decide on a cloth bag, choose one made from organic materials if your budget permits.
5. Choose a bag manufactured in North America if feasible.
6. Inquire about where the bag is manufactured and ask whether the manufacturer complies with environmental laws, fair trade practices, fair labour practices and safe labour protection.

Many companies that supply promotional products will have access to a wide range of reusable bag suppliers.

A comparison of the different types of reusable bags has been compiled by a retailer of reusable bags. It provides a list of the advantages and disadvantages of many types of reusable bags which may be helpful in choosing the right reusable bag for your store. It may be found at:

<https://www.bulletinbag.com/blog/faqs/reusable-bag-materials-comparison-guide/>



Promoting Proper Bag Recycling

Best practice is for your store to have in-store recycling of the single-use bags you distribute. Let your customers know this option is available through signage, by placing the recycling bins in a visible location and by educating your staff to mention this option if a customer inquires about where to dispose of a single-use bag. As explained in the section “Provide In-store Recycling” above you will need a contract with a recycling collection provider to provide in-store recycling.

Train your staff to be aware of the recycling options mentioned below so they can help inform customers. Residents can recycle single-use plastic bags at Recycle BC depots. A list of these may be found at:

<https://recyclebc.ca/recycling-at-home/recycling-depots/>

Another useful directory of retail locations for recycling plastic bags can be found at:

<https://www.plasticfilmrecycling.org/recycling-bags-and-wraps/find-drop-off-location/>

Paper bags can be recycled through curbside or multi-family recycling collection or at Recycle BC depots.



**bring
your
bag**

Appendix A - Single-use Bag Reduction Plans

Single-use Bag Reduction Plan

We commit to reducing the distribution of single-use shopping bags in our store(s).

Retailer:

Location(s):

Launch Date:

Area of operation	By Whom	By When	Notes
Setup			
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify champion			
<input type="checkbox"/> Choose team leader & members			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop objectives			
<input type="checkbox"/> Have objectives approved			
Bags			
<input type="checkbox"/> Set bag fee <input type="radio"/> Single-use <input type="radio"/> Reusable			
<input type="checkbox"/> Source reusable bag			
In-store Recycling			
<input type="checkbox"/> Choose recycling collection provider			
<input type="checkbox"/> Choose location for recycling bins			
<input type="checkbox"/> Source recycling bin			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop signage for recycling bin			
Customer Communications Strategy			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing			
Staff Training			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop staff communications strategy			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop staff training program			
<input type="checkbox"/> Schedule staff training <input type="radio"/> Pre-launch <input type="radio"/> Ongoing			
Monitoring			
<input type="checkbox"/> Measure single-use bag distribution prior to program launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Measure distribution after program launch			

Single-use Bag Elimination Plan

We commit to eliminating the distribution of single-use shopping bags in our store(s).

Retailer:

Location(s):

Launch Date:

Area of operation	By Whom	By When	Notes
Setup			
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify champion			
<input type="checkbox"/> Choose team leader & members			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop objectives			
<input type="checkbox"/> Have objectives approved			
Bags			
<input type="checkbox"/> Source reusable bag			
<input type="checkbox"/> Set reusable bag fee			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop transition strategy			
Customer Communications Strategy			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing			
Staff Training			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop staff communications strategy			
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop staff training program			
<input type="checkbox"/> Schedule staff training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Pre-launch <input type="radio"/> Ongoing 			
Monitoring			
<input type="checkbox"/> Measure single-use bag distribution prior to program launch			
<input type="checkbox"/> Measure distribution during transition to elimination of single-use bags			

Appendix B – Templates for Signage and Till Stickers

You are welcome to use or adapt the logos below for signs or till stickers for your stores. Digital versions may be found on the Recycle BC and Retail Council of Canada websites at:

[Recycle BC](#)

[Retail Council of Canada](#)



Appendix C – Sample Scripts for Training Staff on Customer Interaction



Customer Scenarios²²:

1. Customer with a bag
2. Customer without a bag
3. Customer upset about bag charge – Why?
4. Customer upset about bag charge – Money?



1. Customer with a bag

Cashier: *Your total is \$32.99. Do you need a bag today?*

Customer: *No thanks. I brought my own reusable bag, naturally!*

Cashier: *That's great! Thanks for using one less (plastic/paper) bag!*

Note: **When customers remember to bring their own bags, always take the time to notice and thank them!**



2. Customer without a bag

Cashier: *That's \$32.99. Do you need a bag for that today?*

Customer: *Yes please.*

Cashier: *Just want to let you know we now charge 5¢ a bag.*

Customer: *You're charging for bags?*

Cashier: *Yes, there's a 5¢ Bag Reduction Fee now, to help reduce bag waste.*

Customer: *Oh. Yeah, OK, I guess.*

Cashier: *If you prefer, we also have reusable bags for sale, and remember you can always recycle your bags right here at the store.*

Note: **It's a good idea to offer customers a reusable bag option and remind them about our convenient in-store recycling!**



3. Customer upset about bag charge – Why?

Cashier: *That's \$32.99. Do you need to buy a bag today?*

Customer: *What?? How much?*

Cashier: *There's a 5¢ (Plastic/Paper) Bag Reduction Fee now –*

Customer: *That's stupid! Why??*

Cashier: *Most major retailers are now charging for bags. It actually really helps reduce bag waste. If you prefer, we also have reusable bags for sale.*

Customer: *Never mind, I'll just carry it.*

Cashier: *Even one less bag makes a difference. Thanks for your understanding!*

Note: **It helps to recognize even one less bag, and always thank the customer.**



4. Customer upset about bag charge – Money

Cashier: *That's \$32.99. Do you need to buy a bag for that today?*

Customer: *What?? How much?*

Cashier: *There's a 5¢ Bag Reduction Fee now –*

Customer: *What a rip off! No way these bags cost 5 cents! Where is all that money going?*

Cashier: *The 5¢ goes to cover bag costs and help support our recycling programs.*

Customer: *Fine. Give me a plastic bag. But just one!*

Cashier: *We'll fit everything in there. Thanks for your understanding!*

Note: **Remember to always be efficient with packing bags that customers are paying for. Don't use two when one will do.**





Appendix D - Endnotes

- 1 Source: National Post, Victoria ban on single-use plastic shopping bags to begin in July, <http://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/victoria-ban-on-single-use-plastic-shopping-bags-to-begin-in-july>
- 2 Source: City of Vancouver, Creating a Single-use Item Reduction Strategy, <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/single-use-consultation-paper-9-12-2017.pdf>
- 3 Source: IndyWeek, Do plastic bags ever decompose, <https://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/do-plastic-bags-ever-decompose/Content?oid=1739045>
- 4 Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The New Plastics Economy, p. 18, <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/the-new-plastics-economy-rethinking-the-future-of-plastics>
- 5 Source: Simple Ecology, Paper or plastic shopping bags, <https://www.simpleecology.com/eco/paper-or-plastic-shopping-bags>
- 6 Source: Progressive Bag Alliance, Life Cycle Assessment for Three Types of Grocery Bags - Recyclable Plastic; Compostable, Biodegradable Plastic; and Recycled, Recyclable Paper, <https://plastics.americanchemistry.com/Life-Cycle-Assessment-for-Three-Types-of-Grocery-Bags.pdf>
- 7 Source: Recyc-Quebec, Environmental and Economic Highlights of the Results of the Life Cycle Assessment of Shopping Bags.
- 8 Source: Times Colonist, Victoria city council gives final approval to plastic-bag ban, <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/victoria-city-council-gives-final-approval-to-plastic-bag-ban-1.23143879>
- 9 Source: City of Vancouver, Single Use Items Update and Consultation Launch, <http://council.vancouver.ca/20170627/documents/rr1b.pdf>
- 10 Source: Global News, Atlantic Canada's biggest city to look at banning plastic shopping bags, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3968891/halifax-possible-banning-plastic-shopping-bags/>
- 11 Source: National Post, More than half of Canadians think banning sale of plastic bags a good idea: poll, <http://nationalpost.com/news/more-than-half-of-canadians-think-banning-sale-of-plastic-bags-a-good-idea-poll>
- 12 Source: City of Vancouver, Single-use item reduction strategy, <http://vancouver.ca/green-vancouver/single-use-items.aspx>
- 13 Source: Loblaws, Loblaws launches national plastic shopping bag program, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/loblaw-launches-national-plastic-shopping-bag-reduction-program-537430501.html>
- 14 Source: CBC News, And they said it wouldn't catch on, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/and-they-said-it-wouldn-t-catch-on-1.901224>
- 15 Source: Government of Ireland, Plastic bag levy, <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/environment/topics/waste/litter/plastic-bags/Pages/default.aspx>
- 16 Source: London Drugs, London Drugs takes next step to phase out plastic bags and reduce waste, https://www.londondrugs.com/on/demandware.static/-/Library-Sites-LondonDrugs-content-Library/default/dw7d7d0382/pdf/news/10.16.2017-London_Drugs_Plastic_Bag_Fee_Announcement_January_2018_Launch.pdf
- 17 Source: Mountain Equipment Co-operative, private communication, 20 February 2018.
- 18 Source: Natural Buy, Costco's bring your own shopping bags policy, <http://www.naturalbuy.com/costcos-bring-your-own-shopping-bags-policy/>
- 19 Source: IKEA Canada, IKEA Canada to ban plastic bags, http://www.ikea.com/ca/en/about_ikea/newsitem/2009_plastic_bags
- 20 Source: Alaskans for Litter Protection and Recycling: ALPAR, In-Store Plastic Bag Recycling, Reuse and Conservation Toolkit, <http://www.alparalaska.com/files/AL-PAR-Bag-Best-Practices-Toolkit.pdf>
- 21 Source: Sierra Club, Lead found in reusable shopping bags, <http://blogs.sierraclub.org/greenlife/2011/01/lead-found-in-reusable-shopping-bags.html>
- 22 Acknowledgement – these scripts were inspired by London Drugs' videos for training their staff