

Garbage-less Groceries

Reducing the use of single-use plastic produce bags and plastic packaging in control brands.



To learn more visit
uofttrashteam.ca/producebags

The Produce Bag Problem

Single-use plastic produce bags contribute significantly to plastic waste, of which only 3% is recycled. The remaining 97% goes into landfills or the environment. In Canada, about one quarter of all shoreline litter is from single-use food and beverage packaging, including produce bags. This plastic litter — or pollution — can have harmful impacts on ecosystems and wildlife.

Objectives

1. Estimate how many single-use plastic produce bags are used across Toronto and understand customer behaviour when using these bags.
2. Pilot three different types of interventions at grocery stores to see whether they reduce single-use plastic produce bag use.
3. Inform how grocery stores could reduce single-use plastic packaging in their branded products (i.e. control brands).

Methodology

- Visited 30 locations of 11 grocery store chains in the City of Toronto.
- Quantified and characterized the produce bags in each produce section and observed shoppers' behaviour relevant to the use of produce bags.
- Surveyed 50 Longo's customers to get their perceptions about single-use plastic produce bags and potential alternatives.
- Conducted a 2-month pilot project, testing three different interventions involving signage, display and giveaway of reusable bags, at two Longo's locations.
- To identify the most feasible control-brand packaging substitutions away from plastic, we surveyed 11 grocery store aisles, comparing costs and availability.



Key Findings

- We estimate that 2,000 single-use plastic produce bags are used daily per grocery store in Toronto.
- Across all its stores, a regional store brand in a major national grocery chain spends approximately \$300,000 per year to provide these bags for free.
- During the pilot, single-use plastic produce bag use decreased, and reusable produce bags sales increased.
- Cost-effective alternatives to single-use plastics are available for control brand products.

Recommendations

- Encourage reusable produce bag use.
- Remove extra dispensers of single-use plastic produce bags.
- Reinvest savings in sustainability initiatives.
- Support policies that aim to reduce the use of single-use plastic produce bags.
- Switch away from single-use plastic packaging in specific control brand products.

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Objective 1: Understanding single-use plastic produce bag usage



About **2,000 single-use plastic produce bags** are used daily per grocery store across Toronto. Because these bags are free for customers, this costs a grocery company **approximately \$300,000 per year**.

Useful
39.3%

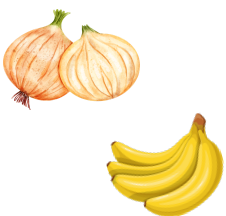


Not useful
60.7%

On average, there are **15 plastic produce bag dispensers** in a store's produce section.

About **61% of these plastic produce bag dispensers** are located near prepackaged items or those with natural peels (i.e. not useful).

Over **30% of customers surveyed use plastic produce bags to carry prepackaged produce items** or those with natural peels.



40% of customers say they already don't use single-use plastic produce bags. Yet, of the 60% of customers who use them, 63% put onions in a produce bag, and 60% bananas.

94% of customers are open to using reusable produce bags as an alternative to single-use plastic produce bags. **72% are willing to buy them.**



52% of customers are willing to pay between \$1 to \$10 for a pack of 5 reusable produce bags. But, 29% of customers are not aware of this option.

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Objective 2: Pilot project with Longo's

Tested 3 levels of interventions at 2 Longo's stores in Toronto, from July to September 2024, to see whether they influenced customer behaviour towards reduced use of single-use plastic produce bags.

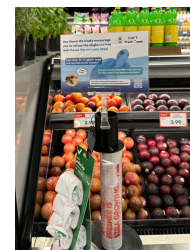
1st Intervention:

Awareness posters



2nd Intervention:

1st intervention + mini awareness signs, display of reusable bags (both locations) + reduced dispensers (only York Mills).

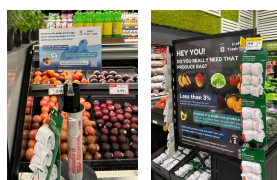


Results

During the third (final) intervention, and compared to our control sample:

3rd Intervention:

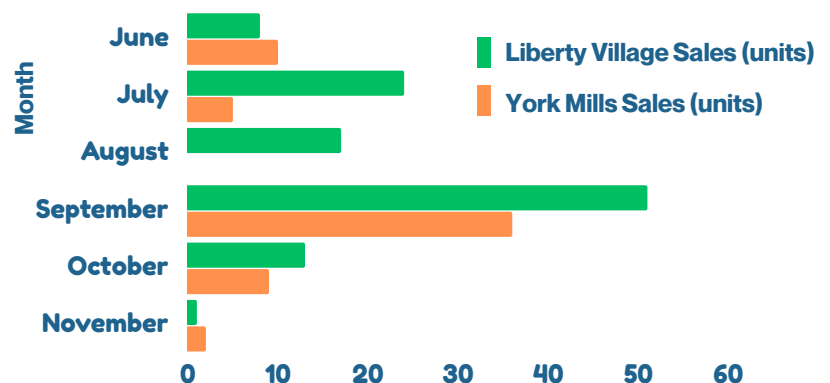
1st and 2nd interventions + donation of reusable bags to customers



There was also a control sample with no intervention prior to the 1st intervention.

- Single-use plastic produce bag use per customer, who took a bag, dropped 39% overall — **46% at Liberty Village** and **25% at York Mills**.
- Single-use produce bag use per customer, including those who took none, also decreased 30% overall — **12.5% at Liberty Village** and **39% at York Mills**.

Sales of Longo's 6-pack reusable bags increased in September, when they were clearly made available during the pilot.



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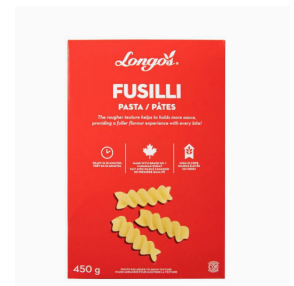
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Objective 3: Reducing the use of plastic within external packaging of Control Brand product categories

Grocery stores can further reduce plastic waste by reducing single-use plastic packaging in control brand products, i.e. store-owned product lines.

To inform the most feasible control brand packaging substitutions, we surveyed the aisles of 11 grocery stores and concluded that switching away from single-use plastic packaging may be done for the following product categories:

- ① Pasta
- ② Crackers & Cookies
- ③ Oats and Nuts
- ④ Rice
- ⑤ Bottled Water
- ⑥ Soda, Juice, and Still Drinks
- ⑦ Seeds and Cereals
- ⑧ Spices
- ⑨ Candies



Examples of suggested switches at Longo's, where products in non-plastic were already available.