Buyer’s Guide to Reusable Bags

Reusable bags can be a major purchase for any organization. Make sure you know the details before you buy to get the most out of your investment.

Welcome!

Whether you’re researching your first order of reusable bags, complying with a bag ban, or looking to be a smarter bag buyer, this guide is for you.

If you want to avoid getting stuck with bags that disappoint you and your customers, learn what customers want and what makes a good bag good. It’s the best way to ensure you get the best bag you can buy and a bag program that performs to your expectations.

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Breaking it Down: A Guide to Bag Bans

What is a mil? How do you define usage? Bag bans can be confusing. If you’re facing a bag ban, check back here for Breaking it Down: A Guide to Bag Bans.

It’s our companion guide to make bag ban compliance easy. With a few clicks here and there, you’ll know how to build a great bag program that is legal and successful.

Let’s get started!
Anatomy of a Reusable Bag

Using the right terms, you’ll be able to discuss and measure gussets, trim, and other reusable bag parts like a pro.

**Front & Back Panels:** The large fabric panels where customized logos and graphics are placed. Print space is usually the space between the handles. Handles can be sewn to the top for wider graphics.

**Handles:** Handles are measured in net length from the top of the bag on one side to the top of the bag on the other. Handles with 50 cm net length fit over the shoulders of most men and women.

**Trim:** A finished ribbon called trim used to attach front panels to the gusset. The trim piece gives the bag crisp corners and reinforces strength. Usually trim matches the bag color and material, but it can contrast for artistic effect.

**Gusset:** A separate piece of fabric between the front and back panels to allow the bag to extend and fold. Not all bags have a gusset. Some bags, like cotton bags, use seams on the bottom to allow the bag to open.

**Top Hem:** The stitching for the fold at the top of the panel. For most reusable bags, the top hem is about one inch below the top of the bag.

**Bottom Insert or Stiffener:** A piece of plastic placed inside the bag for added stability and durability.
Attitudes About Reusable Bags
A good reusable bag program starts with understanding what consumers think and do with their bags. Use these four tips to create a better bag program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Consumers Do</th>
<th>What Consumers Want</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>72% of US consumers describe themselves as reusable bag users.</td>
<td>94% of consumers prefer bags with no logo or a small store logo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 bags the average number of bags owned per US household.</td>
<td>90% of consumers say strength is more important than looks in a bag.</td>
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<tr>
<td>54% of US consumers acquired a bag in the last year.</td>
<td>63% of consumers expect a reusable bag to last a year or more.</td>
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<td>3.6 average purposes for bags (all purpose tote, lunch, etc.).</td>
<td>96% of consumers are willing to pay $2 or more for a bag they like.</td>
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<tr>
<td>74% of consumers have paid $2-$8 for a bag.</td>
<td>61% of US consumers prefer polypropylene bags to any other.</td>
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Four Tips For a Better Bag Program

1. **Be clear about your goals.** Whether you’re giving them away or offering them for resale, you get more value when a customer uses your bag over time. Consider how long you want the bag to last and how important it is to meet consumer expectations.

2. **Buy the strongest bag you can.** One bag failure can ruin a customer’s whole day. If your name is on a bag that fails, your customer is not likely to forget it. To serve your audience well, you need a good quality bag.

3. **Use emotional text and images along with your logo.** Every organization has images or ideas central to its appeal. Highlight emotional graphics and phrases that your customers love alongside your logo.

4. **Add variety to your bag program.** It’s not hard to offer bags that are new and exciting. Vary the color, art, or material of your bag from order to order. Offer two or more bags so consumers can have an extra bag for items like ice cream or wine. Have fun with your bags!
What Makes a Good Bag Good?
One bag failure can ruin a customer’s day. Before you put your name on a bag, make sure it’s a good one. Here’s a breakdown of what makes a good bag good.

A Good Bag Starts with Good Material
Your fabric is your bag. PP material can be strong or weak, thick or thin, stiff or floppy. Skimp on your fabric and your bag will necessarily be weak. When you’re looking for good bag material, look for:

- **Heavyweight material.** The higher the GSM, the more durable and long lasting the fabric will be. Good reusable bags are 90 GSM or higher. Laminated bags are generally 120 GSM.
- **Fabric stiff enough to stand up for loading and unloading.** Even with fabric of the same weight, different makers can create a fabric stiffer or softer. Fabric that stands up saves time at check out for you and your customer.
- **A clean, clear bottom stiffener.** Black bottom stiffeners can get brittle and may contain lead.

The Right Size for Your Target Audience
One size bag does not fit all. Different configurations can help you target your audience and give them a bag they can really use and love.

- **Grocery Bags** should be taller than they are wide to appeal more to female consumers.
- **Hardware Bags** should be wider than they are tall or boxy to appeal more to a male or female audience.
- **Trade show and promotional bags** should be larger to get more attention. Generate more excitement when you opt for 4 color printing.
- **Wine bags, insulated bags, and other specialty bags** add variety and usefulness to your bag program.

A Good Bag Lasts a Year or More
There is no brand value in a bag that’s sitting in a closet or worse, tossed out. Whether your bag is for promotion or resale, your customer will judge your bag based mostly on strength. When they judge your bag, they judge your brand. Make sure your bag is strong enough to last a year or more. Your customers will thank you by using it again and again, giving your brand the value it deserves.
Six Tips for Better Reusable Bag Art

Good reusable bag art doesn’t have to be complicated or expensive. Here are six easy design principles to help you create high impact bag art.

1. Think beyond your logo. Every organization has phrases and images central to its emotional appeal. Use words and images to engage customers emotionally with your brand.

2. Design art to fit the print space. Vertical print spaces benefit from “stacking” art elements. Laminated bags allow you to use the whole bag as your canvas.

3. One color printing can be great. Most major brands focus on one key identifying color for branding. Highlight the color most important to your brand identity to maximize your impact.

4. Use fabric color to convey emotion. The emotional impact of a bag starts with the fabric color. Green bags signal eco-friendliness. Tan bags calm with a natural feel. Red signals strength or excitement. When you match the fabric to your brand color or emotion, the whole bag conveys your identity. White or black ink adds your message without interfering with strong brand colors.

5. Keep It Simple. One great image is more memorable than a crowd of logos or information. Be selective. If you have sponsors, make their logos smaller. Always put your logo on both sides of the bag. You get half the value if you print on only one side.

6. Team up. If you don’t have a graphic artist on staff, team up with a local artist to create a unique design. Many artists will work free for exposure to a larger audience. Or contact us. I Bag at a Time has the experience to help you create a memorable look for your bag.
NWPP: The Most Popular Bag Material
Your material is your bag. Understanding NWPP can go a long way to helping you choose a bag you love and avoid bags that will disappoint you.

What is NWPP?
NWPP stands for non-woven polypropylene. It's a fabric made from plastic that feels like canvas. It's an ideal bag material: clean, durable, affordable, machine washable, recyclable, and available in many colors.

To make NWPP, polypropylene beads are melted, spun, extruded, and pressed into rolls. The final rollers have a pattern to create the characteristic texture.

Your Material Is Your Bag
A penny or two invested in good fabric is a small price to pay for a good quality reusable bag that does the job right. Here is what to look for:

**Purity:** Good quality NWPP is made from pure 100% polypropylene. Whether it is woven or non-woven, good PP is strong, flexible, and non-toxic. Cheap fabrics can contain lead or toxins that compromise your bag. Ask your supplier for quality testing to ensure purity.

**Weight:** Fabric thickness is measured in Grams per Square Meter (GSM). The heavier the fabric, the more durable the bag. Our fabric is always 90 GSM. Many bag companies use 80 GSM or less. Check to be sure you're getting the quality you and your customers want.

**Stiffness:** Good NWPP stands up for loading and unloading. A bag that flops takes longer to load, wasting time for you and your customer.

PP Is the Number One Recommended Bag
Governments, scientists and consumer groups all recommend NWPP bags. Their very popularity makes them beneficial to the environment because people actually use them over and over. No bag does the planet good when it's sitting in a closet.

Here are a few links to people who recommend NWPP bags:

- **Green Cities California**, a Master Environmental Assessment commissioned by California cities
- **Los Angeles County**, sponsor of the largest bag ban in the nation to date.
- **The Huffington Post** Buying Guide: The Best Reusable Shopping Bags
Laminated PP: The Strongest Bag Material

Reusable bags can be a major purchase for any organization. Make sure you know the details before you buy to get the most out of your investment.

How Are Laminated Bags Made?

Laminated bags begin with a base layer (substrate) that is white. Then, a thin layer of polypropylene sheeting is printed with four color graphics and laminated on top of the substrate. The top layer is heat bonded for a permanent seal. Panels are precision cut and sewn after printing.

Your Material Is Your Bag

Most laminated bags use one of the following three substrates. No matter which one you choose, the four color graphics in the exterior lamination layer is all the customer will see from the outside. The substrate is only visible on the inside of the bag.

- **Woven PP** For this material, strips of PP are woven together and a lamination layer bonds the weave together. This material is incredibly strong and is often used for sand bags, tarps, and other industrial uses. This substrate puckers after 6-8 months as the material ages.
- **NWPP** Lamination gives NWPP a strong, puncture-resistant top layer for a smooth great looking bag. Once laminated, NWPP weighs 120 GSM, making it extra durable and long lasting. This is a premium choice for grocery bags, promotional bags, or custom bags for any organization.
- **Recycled PET (rPET)** Water-bottles are shredded and spun into a substrate fabric to create recycled reusable bags. The lamination sheeting is not recycled, so the final bag contains 85% post-consumer waste. RPET bags are the gold standard in eco-friendly bags, ideal to demonstrate your commitment to the environment.

Laminated Bag Art Options

We offer these art options when ordering laminated bags:

1. **Same or different art on opposing sides.** Our standard pricing includes identical art on front and back, and identical art on both gussets. Different art on opposing sides is possible with additional set up fees.
2. **Trim and handles:** Most laminated bags have matching laminated handles, but some use contrasting fabric or color.
3. **Glossy or matte finish.** As with a printed photo, you can choose glossy or matte to suit your taste.
Plastic Inserts: The Low Down
That small piece of plastic in a reusable bag can extend bag life dramatically. But down isn’t good if it’s dirty or toxic. Make sure yours is clean and safe.

What Does the Insert Do?
The plastic insert has two main functions. First, it protects the bottom of your bag from pressure points. The corner of a box or a sharp object can tear bag fabric even when the bag is not overloaded. The plastic bottom insert prevents bag failure due to pressure points.
The insert also helps stabilize the bag. Stores and consumers save time when a bag stands up for loading and unloading. A flat bottom ensures items are supported and stable during packing and when the bag is lifted.
Laminated bags generally don’t need inserts. Lamination makes the fabric thicker, stronger and stiff enough to hold its shape while loading.
No matter what kind of bag you have, make sure you take a minute to rinse or clean your bottom inserts often.

Clear PE Inserts Are Better
Compared to black PP stiffeners, clear polyethylene (PE) bag inserts are cleaner, more flexible, and longer lasting. PE is a food-grade plastic, the same plastic used in water bottles. It is non-toxic, recyclable, and it remains strong and flexible for up to two years.
Because it is clear, you can be sure no lead has gone into them. Lead and other heavy metals are dark in color. For a bottom insert, transparency is an indication of purity.

Problems with Black Inserts
Black PP inserts can vary widely in composition because many of them use recycled materials which can be contaminated. A main source of recycled PP is car parts, which have no business near your food. Lead and other toxins are easily hidden in the black molded plastic.
PP inserts also dry out and become brittle quickly. They can be prone to breakage in a few months and are not designed to last for a year. One crack can lead to an early failure of your bag.