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For hardest-to-open packages. Page 35

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The Oyster Awards

CR's picks for America's hardest-to-open packages



Too often, today's packages force consumers to fight tooth and nail to get at what's inside. Make no mistake, we're talking literally teeth, fingernails, knives, wire cutters, pliers, hacksaws, ice picks—whatever it takes to get the job done.

That's the message we received, and those were some of the implements cited, when we asked visitors to Consumer Reports.org about packaging that gives them fits. Clearly, we struck a nerve.

You need a delicate balance of force

and finesse when opening some bags to avoid spraying the kitchen counter with fruity flakes, while playthings have become captives in their plastic shrouds, restrained by wires, bands, straps, tape, glue, and screws. So heavily shrink-wrapped are CDs that companies sell a special gadget with a retractable blade to slice through the cellophane and security seal. A typical comment came from Stacey L. Oller of Portland, Ore., who railed against "CDs with all those stupid seal

stickers and outer plastic that sticks because of static to everything and shreds into little bits when you tear it. Grrrrr!"

Frustration isn't the only result of a tangle with problem packaging. We heard about bloodied fingers, hands, and arms. Take those clear-plastic clamshells fitted around everything from makeup to inkjet cartridges. When sliced open, the plastic can cut you, and it's all but impossible to extricate the contents without weaponry.

To determine the winners of the

THE ENVELOPE PLEASE ...



The hard-plastic clamshell

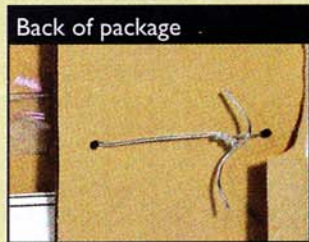
Pictured Uniden Digital Cordless Phone set. It has 14 pieces, with rivets between each.

How long to open 9 minutes 22 seconds

Experience The clamshell didn't take longest for our reporter to open, but it wins because he could have cut himself on its sharp edges. It was impossible to open by hand, and the plastic was too thick for scissors. He switched to a box cutter, which worked well, though cutting around corners was tricky and the blade slipped. Neither brute force nor a screwdriver would pry apart the rivets. He used a razor blade to bypass them and cut around each item, but he sliced the instruction manual and nearly cut the battery wires.

What a reader said about clamshells "I had to use a saw blade to cut through the package and still sliced open my finger trying to tear it apart," said Mark Eaton of Massachusetts, vice president of information systems for a housewares manufacturer.

A BETTER WAY The Schick Intuition All-In-One ladies' razor. Press the top of the box to start releasing perforations around the perimeter of its plastic clamshell, then pull the package apart.



Toy packaging

Pictured American Idol Barbie. She has a rock 'n' roll attitude, complete with clothing, jukebox, CDs, and more.

How long to open 15 minutes 10 seconds

Experience Freeing Barbie and her stuff entailed untwisting wires, snapping rubber bands, stripping tape, slicing thick plastic manacles off her arms and torso, cutting off a tab embedded in her head, and carefully ripping a series of stitches securing her tresses to a plastic strip on the back of the box. Most of the job had to be done carefully by hand, with help from a single-edge razor blade. Barbie lost a few hairs in the liberation process.

What a reader said about toy packaging "Have any of these toy makers actually tried to open their product on Christmas morning with a 4-year-old clamoring for it?" said Jaye Tupponce, a stay-at-home mom from Massachusetts.

A BETTER WAY None are expected anytime soon. Toys used to come in boxes; accessories in soft plastic bags. But that was before the push toward hands-on packaging and total display. We did hear this advice from experts and readers: Free the toy before you give it to the child. That way, you'll avoid frustrating the kid, if not yourself.

CONSUMER REPORTS Oyster Awards for hard-to-open packages, we began by sifting through 237 nominations from subscribers. Next, we shopped for the types of products readers mentioned most, tried to find even worse examples, and studied all the purchases in our labs. Finally, our technical experts watched a reporter open the packages, timing him and noting the obstacles he faced. The order of our choices is based on a combination of the time it took to crack the package and the potential hazard involved.

We also interviewed packaging experts and hoped that manufacturers would tell

us why their products have become so hard to extricate and what is being done to address wrap rage. Few of the companies responded to our queries.

WHY PACKAGING IS A PROBLEM

The changes wrought by packaging technology have proved a double-edged sword (one of the few implements readers didn't mention). Although there are some benefits, including the ability to keep food fresher longer, packages are just plain harder to use. Here's why:

Plastics. When plastic became cheaper than cardboard, about a decade ago,

manufacturers were able to wrap goods in new ways. Many of those options proved harder to open than the cardboard box.

Safety and theft. Federal safety laws require seals that will show evidence of tampering, and child-safety caps on most over-the-counter drugs. That often makes them adult-proof, too, says Laura Bix, assistant professor of packaging at Michigan State University. Meanwhile, shoplifting losses at retail stores in the U.S. are an estimated \$15 billion a year, according to Ernst & Young, leading to electronic tags and big, sealed packaging even for tiny items, so they can't be pocketed.

3rd Disc and game packaging

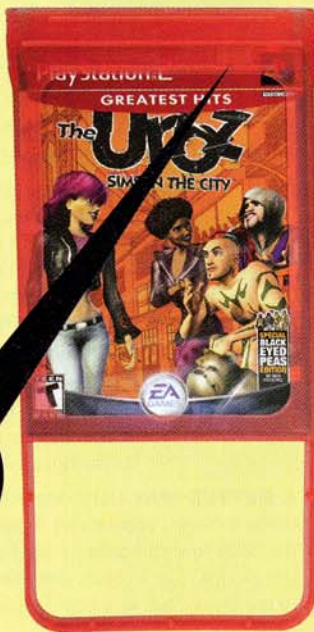
Pictured The Urbz: Sims in the City, for PlayStation 2. Jewel cases wrapped in cellophane with security stickers along the edges. Some come with extra armor such as a hard plastic yoke.

How long to open 3 minutes 24 seconds

Experience The stickers shred when you peel them; the cellophane is tight and often lacks a tear strip or tab. But those may be the least of your problems. To discourage theft, our video game, from Costco Wholesale, came with a thick, rigid yoke enclosing the jewel case. The manufacturer recommended using scissors, but they barely penetrated the plastic. Our reporter decided against using a blade for fear of cutting the jewel case. Finally, he hacked through the yoke with wire snips.

What a reader said about disc packaging "Removing the tamper-prevention seals (at top & bottom) can result in ripping off the cover," said Michael Paluszek, an engineer from New Jersey.

A BETTER WAY A legal download off the Internet. Also, some stores don't attach ironclad excess packaging or, like the Toys "R" Us we visited, they remove the theft-resistant display case at the cash register. We've also seen discs with tabs to help you remove the cellophane, as well as key-ring-sized tools designed to slice through the seals. Check with your local music store or search for these tools at an online music site.



4th Pills in blister packs

Pictured Sudafed Cold & Cough liquid caps. Ten caplets in a plastic pack with foil and paper backing.

How long to open About a minute. It took less, if our reporter managed to rip the perforations between the caplets neatly; more, if the package tore, taking part of the foil or paper with it.

Experience The perforations didn't run the length of the pack, making strips difficult to rip. And the pills were so large and close together that our reporter couldn't bend strips back and forth to loosen the perforations. On occasion, the individual pill blisters didn't separate neatly, which frustrated his attempts to peel off the paper backing. Long fingernails would have helped. When he was finally able to remove the paper and tried to push the pill through the secondary foil backing, he exerted too much pressure with his clunky fingers, sending the pill flying.

What a reader said about pills in blister packs "The peel-off doesn't peel off. I have tried soaking them in hot water, Goo Gone, microwaving, knives, scissors, hatchet, and .45 caliber," said Dick Baker, a retired material manager from California. (We hope he was joking about the .45.)

A BETTER WAY Jr. Tylenol Meltaways. The pills are widely spaced, the deeply scored perforations rip easily, there's a starter tab for the paper backing, and the paper and foil peel off as one, so there's no need to squeeze the pill through anything.

Overseas manufacturing. Products were once largely made in the U.S., but many are now made abroad and must withstand a long sea voyage in a cargo-ship container, says Chris Byrne, editor-at-large of Toys & Family Entertainment, a trade magazine. Rigid plastic containers excel at keeping everything in place.

"Try me" packaging. Children are encouraged to touch and interact with playthings before buying them. This has led to the creation, for instance, of what might be called Prisoner Barbie—a doll with shackled accessories. They are easy to see but hard to steal, Byrne says.

BETTER ALTERNATIVES

For all the negatives, there is good news about packaging. Some companies are listening to consumers and making changes. For a prime example, coffee packaging, see CloseUp, below.

In other initiatives, General Mills reduced by an average of 20 percent the amount of effort needed to open most of its cereal bags, says company spokeswoman Kirstie Foster. Similarly, Frito-Lay made "pinch-grip opening pillow pouches" (industry-speak for bags) of Lays potato chips and Fritos corn chips easier to open and less likely to tear than

they were about five years ago, according to Jay Gehring, vice president of packaging research and development.

There's good news from an environmental standpoint, too. Dannon eliminated the plastic cap over the peel-back foil seals on its yogurt cups, a move that public relations director Michael Neuwirth estimates will save about 3.6 million pounds of plastic a year. And many big retailers are trying to reduce the amount of virgin plastic in their containers, in response to costs and environmental concerns, says Joe Angel, vice president and publisher of Packaging World, a trade publication.

5th Cereal boxes

Pictured Honey Bunches of Oats. Most cereals are packaged in plastic bags in cardboard boxes.

How long to open Approximately 20 seconds. The issue wasn't time; it was opening box and bag without unwanted rips or spills.

Experience You wouldn't starve to death opening a cereal box, but keeping the bag intact and the food inside can be a challenge. We tried three different boxes and encountered various problems. With Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats, our reporter grabbed hold of each side of the bag below the fused seal and pulled. The bag ripped about halfway down the side, but no cereal spilled because there was plenty of headroom. With Post's Honey Bunches of Oats, the tenaciously glued cardboard box top ripped in half. When our reporter used the same technique as with the Mini-Wheats, the bag burst apart, spewing cereal. By the third box, General Mills' Honey Nut Chex, he had refined his technique slightly, which resulted in a stress-free opening.

What readers said about cereal boxes "I end up with a big hole in the middle of the bag, cereal on the floor, and the glue still holding," said Matt Clay, a software engineer from Texas. "There is no delicate way of opening these packages. Brute force. Perhaps this is America's answer to our exercise problem," said Steve Valiquette, a small-business owner from Florida.

A BETTER WAY Malt-O-Meal Honey Nut Toasty O's, in a resealable soft plastic bag with a tear-off top and a convenient pour spout.



closeup

THE COFFEE CAN EVOLVES

The originals



Old metal canisters required an opener, creating an ultrasharp lid and razorlike burrs inside the can, which you then covered with a plastic top.



For years, instant coffee lived inside a glass jar with a screw-off lid.

The offspring



Most cans now have a peel-back foil lid. Folgers took the design a step further, replacing the cylindrical can with an ergonomic plastic container featuring an indented handle that you clutch with one hand.



Nescafé Taster's Choice moved to a plastic container with a snap-top lid that opens when you squeeze the jar and shuts when you press down on it. Joanne Crawford, beverage marketing communications director at Nestlé, said the move was risky since people were used to the old jar, and sales slumped when early tops were hard to open. Nestlé changed the top, and sales are up, she added.