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# The New York Times Magazine

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By Ann Hulbert

# Package Deal

How to solve a problem that consumers hate?  
With a product, of course.



## OpenX

Nobody likes those incredibly hard-to-open, clear plastic packages that hang from retail pegboards, trapping your new purchase inside, clearly visible but seemingly unattainable without a long struggle, a sharp implement and possibly an injury. Nevertheless, this packaging method is pervasive and shows no sign of disappearing soon. Here's a case, then, in which the marketplace simply ignores consumers.

Actually, that's not true. The marketplace is not ignoring consumers at all. In fact, in a recent roundup of the worst packaging, Consumer Reports noted that "a cottage industry has developed among manufacturers looking to cash in on packaging angst." One prominent example: OpenX, a \$5 device designed specifically to help people cope with seemingly impregnable plastic casings. Its inventor, Tom Perlmutter, says that in the few years that the gizmo has been on the market, he has sold nearly a million of them.

The problem that OpenX and rivals with names like Pyranna and iSlice aim to solve is referred to in the packaging business as "the blister-pack clamshell." Basically this is hard plastic cleverly

molded to fit neatly around whatever the item inside might be and sealed tightly around every edge. Like a clam. This style of packaging appeals to the retailer and product maker for several reasons, explains Ron Romanik, editor in chief of Package Design Magazine. Harder to open can mean harder to steal, which retailers like. The clear shell is supposed to let the consumer see everything in the package and know that it's all intact. Plus, product makers take advantage of using snazzy cardboard inserts bound inside the hard shell that can do more to grab the shopper's eye than a smaller box might.

While the clamshell is often associated with tech gadgets, it's actually used across a large range of categories. The two most egregious examples from Consumer Reports, for instance, were an Oral-B toothbrush kit (opening it involved a box cutter and a shower of "sharp plastic shards") and a Bratz doll. The OpenX creator, Perlmutter, once owned an ad agency and had plenty of familiarity with the clamshell. "Several of our clients were big packagers," he says. He had been considering making the leap to marketing a product of his own, and a friend persuaded him that a clamshell fighter was the way to go. A bit like a box cutter crossed with a wrench, OpenX has a small retractable blade on the outside that's meant to cut a one-inch opening in the side of the clamshell; then you slide in the U-shaped front end of the thing, which has another blade, and push it all the way around, basically removing one side of the clam. It's meant to be safer and more efficient than the hack-it-up-with-a-box-cutter approach.

Many OpenX buyers have learned about it from Web and media outlets reaching people who are sick of challenging packaging: the gadget blog Gizmodo, consumer-tip television segments, newspaper columnists and so on. In addition to his own site, Perlmutter peddles the device through catalogs, including Extreme Geeks and Smart Home. Big retailers like Office Depot stock it mainly during the holiday season, when package frustration peaks.

Romanik of Package Design Magazine points out several initiatives among packagers to get away from the clamshell. One case study: Hewlett Packard printing cartridges, which used to come in a cardboard box that was in turn sealed in a clamshell ("at the request of 'club' store retailers," Package Design Magazine noted) but has since removed the plastic in favor of a Durafold carton that uses a lot less material and is much easier to open. That approach also cuts down on waste — a factor that makes clamshell packages a target of the environmentally concerned.

Perlmutter doesn't seem worried that a wave of easy-to-open packaging will make his tool obsolete. And here's one reason: If you find an OpenX in a store, it will probably be . . . encased in a hard-to-open clamshell. Perlmutter says that mail orders are shipped in a small box, but most stores won't stock it that way. In general, they will "only let me sell it to them in a clamshell," he says. "I don't know that I've had a retailer buy it any other way." ■

Illustration by Leif Parsons