

Shopping bags handy, trendy

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Question: What was the hottest accessory in the United States in the past year? Jewelry? Designer handbags? Oversized sunglasses?

Answer: None of the above. It was reusable shopping bags, sales of which jumped 72 percent from May 2007 through May 2008, according to consumer and retail information company the NPD Group.

The bags are at once practical, eco-friendly and trendy, and they're as likely to be seen on the arms of shoppers in the aisles of your local supermarket as they are on celebrities.

In Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, nearly every supermarket sells inexpensive reusable bags, and a few boutiques offer pricier versions with pithy messages: "Love this planet." "Get hip get green."

Cincinnati-based Kroger has sold reusable bags for about 15 years, but sales have skyrocketed recently: The company sold 2.5 million last year and expects to sell 10 million this year, says Kroger spokeswoman Meghan Glynn.

Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Meijer has sold nearly 800,000 bags since introducing them in its 182 stores last October, says Frank J. Guglielmi, director of public relations.

Erlanger-based Remke Markets has sold about 70,000 reusable bags in its eight area stores since introducing them last June, says spokesman Pat Iasillo.

Cincinnati-based bigg's has sold more than 60,000 bags in its 11 stores since introducing them in December, says Meredith Trombly, category manager for natural and organic food.

Reusable bags have caught on with customers for reasons as varied as what's in their shopping carts.

Teresa Siffel of Verona, who fell in love with the colorful bags Kroger sold around the time of the Cincinnati Flower Show, now loves them for other reasons.

"You can put more stuff in them and you don't have to worry about your stuff falling through (as you would with) a plastic bag," says Siffel, a 34-year-old mother of five with a sixth on the way. "And they've got the longer straps, so you can carry more in the house and take less trips in."

Another bonus: Kroger takes 5 cents off her bill for each bag she brings with her on shopping trips. Her eight bags have just about paid for themselves, she says.

Dara Gordon of Park Hills also likes that the reusable bags hold many more groceries than the plastic bags.

"We were able to reduce the number of bags from the grocery from 15-20 down to five-six in every trip," says Gordon, 26. "They are also much easier to carry when you have an almost 2-year-old with you, too."

Esther Lenahan of Hebron was intrigued by the concept of reusable bags when she first spotted them at Wild Oats (now Whole Foods) about six years ago.

Lenahan, who has 10 bags of various sizes from different stores, says she's more conscious of excess product packaging and when it might be better to buy fresh instead of boxed, bagged or frozen.

"Ever since using the reusable bags, it makes me stop and think about my purchases more," says Lenahan, a 31-year-old mother of a toddler.

But the switch from paper or plastic to reusable bags is not always seamless.

The most common complaint is that it can be hard to remember to bring them to the store or take out of your car. One solution is to invest in a brand that's designed to fold up small enough to fit into your purse, such as Envirosax or ChicoBags, both carried by Over-the-Rhine store Park + Vine.