

New packaging for Microsoft's Mac software decidedly 'green'

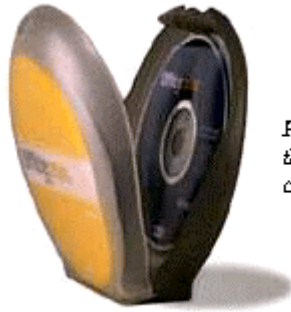
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By Environmental Packaging Guide, ©Thompson Publishing Group

Incorporating recycled plastic, new package is 10 times lighter and reusable.

Microsoft's new plastic package for its "Office 2001: Mac" software — expected to arrive in stores in October — is a model of "green" packaging design. It is reduced, weighing one-fourth of what the old cardboard box weighed, and reusable, and it contains 50% postconsumer resin. It also has been engineered according to the European Union's essential standards, and it complies with every environmental packaging and labeling law in the countries in which it is being marketed, according to company officials.

"We have made a huge effort to standardize, simplify and be more environmentally friendly," said Patti Sullivan, senior project manager in the package engineering management group of Microsoft's Worldwide Operations Division in Seattle. "That's the direction Microsoft is driving our packaging."



Radically different from its predecessor, the new Office 2001: Mac packaging is one-tenth the weight and reusable.

The package — a rounded jewel case about 6 inches wide, 6 inches high and 1.5 inches deep, and weighing 180 grams — has a clear frosted acrylic front and a graphite gray back made from 100% postconsumer recycled water bottles and CD cases. The package contains one CD and five polypropylene sleeves, which can hold 10 CDs.

"We encourage customers to use the extra sleeves to hold other CDs they may want to store," said Amie Servais, lead product manager for the Macintosh Business Unit. The instructions in the package suggest that the box be kept on the desk to hold CDs. In addition, the box holds a paper license agreement (which is required by law), an eight-page booklet or "ReadMe card" that provides information on how to get started with the software, and a "front insert" giving the brand and product name. A "backing card" with the bar code and certificate-of-authenticity label is attached to the outside of the case back, and the entire package is shrink-wrapped.

This package is radically different from the packaging for "Office 98 Macintosh Edition." That package consisted of a paperboard box measuring 7.87" x 9.5" x 3.87" thick and contained a corrugated cardboard insert, several hundred pages worth of manuals, a CD in a polystyrene acrylic jewel case, a registration card and other collateral materials. As a unit, the new product weighs one-tenth of what the old one weighed.

The manuals are now online. “We’ve made some big leaps to be online, be more user-friendly, streamlined, not too complex,” Sullivan said.

Design process

Microsoft’s journey from old to new packaging started when the Mac product group decided it “wanted to do something special for Mac users,” according to Sullivan, who works with Microsoft Operations sites in the United States, Ireland and Singapore to develop packaging specifications and standards, and managed the development of the new Mac software package.

Many Mac users are artists, designers and home computer users, as opposed to big businesses, which most often use PCs. “We wanted to design a package that would appeal to their sense of style, creativity and fun,” Servais said.

The Mac product group contacted Sullivan, whose responsibilities include packaging for all Windows and Office products at Microsoft, and told her they wanted something to appeal to this specialized subset of Microsoft customers, with something “innovative, streamlined and stylish,” Servais said.

The advertising group had come up with some sketches for a rounded plastic case, which had been approved by the marketing group before being forwarded to Sullivan. “We first tried to solve the need for a cool new package with paper,” but after presenting several paperboard solutions, it became clear that the goal would not work in paperboard and would have to be made of plastic, she said.

With no experience in that material, Sullivan contacted Ivy Hill Corp.-Warner Media Services (New York), which prints most of Microsoft’s retail boxes in North America. “Since Ivy Hill is part of Warner, I thought: they must do video and CD boxes and must know plastic,” Sullivan said. As it turned out, the first design offered by Ivy Hill was the one MS ended up using. “We had a very condensed timeframe, and Ivy Hill did a great job guiding us through the plastic process,” she said.

At Microsoft, the normal timeframe for a new package is 26 weeks from the creative to the production stage, but this was not enough time for an injection-molded plastic package — just making the mold required a minimum of 16 weeks, Sullivan said.

Environmental packaging protocol

The next step was to confront the environmental issues of the new package. Sullivan contacted Victor Bell of Environmental Packaging International (EPI) in Jamestown, RI, to help guide her through the maze of state and international packaging laws. EPI and Microsoft have been working together to develop an “environmental packaging protocol,” a set of questions to ask during the design phase of each package and packaging component. “The Office 2001:Mac package is our ‘pilot’ case study for this new protocol,” Sullivan said.

Following the protocol would allow Microsoft to ensure that the new package system — and any new package — complies with all environmental packaging requirements worldwide, including the European Union’s essential requirements for recyclability, source reduction and other attributes; California and Oregon’s rigid plastic packaging laws; and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) labeling guidelines.

“We faced several environmental problems from the very beginning,” Sullivan said. First, the new package fit the definition of a rigid plastic packaging container under California’s S.B. 235, so it would need to contain postconsumer material. Microsoft could have argued that the package complies with the law because it is designed to be reused, but instead chose to comply through the recycled content option, Bell said.

According to Sullivan, “We wanted to find a very strong plastic so it would be durable, but since it’s an RPPC, it needed to have recycled content.” Originally, Microsoft had “spec’ed out” the new

box to be clear, “but the postconsumer material had specks, so we decided to go with a clear virgin front and the back with postconsumer material,” colored to help mask the specks. This decision incidentally offered Microsoft the opportunity to have the new package match the sleek graphite color of Apple’s iMac computer. Then the plastic injection molding company found a good source of clean postconsumer resin, from water bottles and CDs, with no specks but with a slight brownish tinge. This solved the California problem.

One of the European Union’s essential requirements is for a package to be as small as possible — “so manufactured that the packaging volume and weight [are] limited to the minimum adequate amount to maintain the necessary level of safety, hygiene and acceptance for the packed product and for the consumer.” At the same time, consumer product companies selling in the European market must pay, for each packaging component, recycling fees that may be based variously on weight, dimensions, volume or material, depending on the country. These fees are paid to third-party recycling organizations in a number of countries.

EPI found that Microsoft would save about 13.5 cents per unit in Germany; the fee for the Office 1998 Macintosh Edition package, at 392 grams and 4,378 cubic centimeters, was 19.92 cents per unit, while the fee for the Office 2001 package, at 139 grams and 964 cubic centimeters, is 6.5 cents, Bell said. Packaging fees in other European countries are lower, but the savings nevertheless are significant, such as the difference between 3.5 cents and 0.5 cents in Austria, he added.

Transport packaging is another area both Microsoft and the environment benefit. The amount of transport packaging needed to ship Office 2001 is reduced by more than 50%, meaning lower recycling costs for Microsoft and reduced motor vehicle emissions, according to Bell.

As far as labeling is concerned, Microsoft identified the amount of recycled content on the ReadMe card within the new package but did not claim reusability, following the FTC Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims.

“Microsoft has stepped out of the ‘box’ to simplify packaging, reduce materials and become more environmentally friendly in our product packaging,” Sullivan said.

For more information:

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