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Moving On Up

EarthFriendlyMoving squeezes boxes from bleach bottles and sends cardboard packing



Spencer Brown and his reusable recycled plastic RecoPack moving boxes.

As Spencer Brown stood atop a pile of discarded cardboard boxes in a stinking Southern California landfill in the spring of 2006, a deep feeling of regret sank in. Brown, an inventor and product designer, arrived at the landfill after being repeatedly thwarted in his efforts to find a second home for the \$800 worth of cardboard he'd bought to move his home office — recycling centers wouldn't process it, trash collectors charged a steep fee, and his Craigslist ad yielded just a few scavengers who cherry-picked the best boxes and left the rest.

"When you're surrounded by trash, you really start thinking about your life, and you think, I'm adding to this problem," Brown remembers.

Off in the distance, however, Brown's artist eye spotted a rainbow-colored mound of what turned out to be HDPE #2 plastic bottles — mostly bleach and detergent containers. At that moment, the connection between the two stagnant trash piles clicked: use this plastic and eliminate the cardboard box.

Nine months later, Brown rolled out the RecoPack, a reusable lime-green moving tote box made entirely from recycled plastic bottles. Brown rents the boxes through his company, EarthFriendlyMoving, delivering them to clients' homes in bio-fuel trucks (earthfriendlymoving.com). The customers pack their belongings, move to their new abode, and Brown's fleet of eco-trucks pick up the boxes to be used another day.

According to Brown's calculations, for every hundred-box order, the company keeps more than 350 pounds of cardboard and 500 pounds of trash out of the landfill, spares the atmosphere from 2,500 pounds of CO2 and saves three trees, 50 gallons of gas and 300 gallons of water.

Through prolific word-of-mouth advertising, EarthFriendlyMoving has made somewhere in the neighborhood of 38,000 deliveries to date, at a rate of about 120 to 150 a day.

After the buzz surrounding the RecoPack, Brown created several other earth-friendly products including the RecoCube, a compostable, recycled paper replacement for the packing peanut and the Poopy Pallet, a plastic pallet made from recycled baby diapers.

Ever since that fateful day at the landfill, Brown has been committed to reducing packing and moving-related waste, mainly cardboard, of which he says only 40 percent gets recycled.

"Reusing is great, recycling is great, the problem is that it's not efficient," he says. "Getting a 40 percent return is not enough. Why would you cut down a tree to make a box when you can use our trash to make a better one?" he says.

Southern California-based EarthFriendlyMoving will go nationwide this coming year, and each outpost will keep more than 90 percent of its profits in the local economy.

Aside from the obvious environmental benefits, Brown sees the company's rapid success grounded in the fact that at the end of the day, it's simply more convenient for the customer. "The marketplace over the last 20 years has been conditioned to do two things — save time and money," Brown says. "And we're doing both of those."

— Andy Anderson

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