I Can’t Hear You, I’m Eating Sun Chips

By KIM UKURA, Associate Editor, PD&D

About six months ago, Frito-Lay launched the new biodegradable bag for Sun Chips [1] with a splashy marketing campaign that played up that the bags are compostable. They’re made of polylactic acid (PLA) [2], a polymer made from plant materials, which Frito-Lay claimed would compost in 14 weeks.

Sounds great, right?

Wrong. Turns out sound is actually a problem – one major side effect of the new environmentally friendly bags is that they’re loud. Really loud.

Last week, three editors here at our Madison office did a taste test for a sister magazine, Food Manufacturing *[3]*, comparing Sun Chips to another chip brand with a compostable bag. The three agreed that the Sun Chips bag was very loud, “Especially if you were trying to be stealth about it.” One editor even noted, “It is a very annoying sound … it’s not just the volume, something about the sound is very striking to the ear.”

After absorbing the slew of complaints (as well as some thanks from customers happy with the ability to recycle the bags), Frito-Lay decided to pull the bags from five of their six flavor varieties. They’ll keep the new environmentally friendly bags on the specially marked packages of the original plain flavor, the second best-selling variety, but go back to the old bags on the rest.

“We need to listen to our consumers," said spokeswoman Aurora Gonzales to the Associated Press [4]. "We clearly heard their feedback."

Yikes, Frito-Lay, your environmentally responsible packaging is making it harder for me to sneak a few delicious potato chips. For shame!

I'm teasing, a bit anyway, but mostly because there are a few things I just don't understand about this story. First, did Frito-Lay not do any product testing with the new bags? Did no one in the entire company realize the bags were louder than a normal chip container? Could Frito-Lay even hear the consumer comments over the rattling and crunching of their absurdly loud product?

That seems unlikely to me. It seems more likely that Frito-Lay did market testing, saw the results, and decided to push the product out on consumers anyway because they figured the good vibes from an environmentally responsible product would be enough. That's just poor product research and design.

Second, are consumers really this fickle? Did so many people refuse the small inconvenience of a noisier chip bag that Frito-Lay felt forced to back down and start over?

My heart says, "No, we're more rational than that!" But my gut says, "Yes, we're babies that create and join Facebook complaint campaigns at the slightest inconvenience." Truly, I apologize for my generation and our propensity to protest meaninglessly.

What's next? Will we soon demand a crunch-free potato chip? Only eat soft pretzels? Cut back on our Rice Crispies and carrots and biscotti? Please, count me out.

Certainly, loud snack bags are annoying, but overflowing landfills and products that can be thrown away but will never disappear are a lot more than a simple aggravation. Whatever mistakes Frito-Lay may have made in developing this product, the bigger mistake was backing down to a few hypocritically noisy and short-sighted consumers.

If you want to respond, you'll have to be loud – I'm snacking on some Sun Chips right now. Did you find the new bags so grossly annoying you refused to buy Sun Chips? Are consumers so petty about noise pollution they'll ignore actual pollution? Leave your comments below or e-mail kim.ukura@advantagemedia.com *[5].*

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