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Artifact

A box of Reynolds Wrap. A lot of people use things like saran wrap and tin foil in their everyday life in order to store food. But when using these boxes—taking a box for Reynolds Wrap as our example—many people have a lot of difficulty keeping the bulk of the roll in the box while unwinding the desired amount of foil. The roll just always falls out. Some people press the sides of the box together when they are pulling the foil, but this can be difficult since as humans, we only have two hands.

Critique

Some of you might know this and think everyone who doesn’t know this is an idiot. You’ll find it’s surprising that so many people have never noticed this before. But in fact, many people have never seen this part of Reynolds Wrap boxes before: there are little tabs at the sides that say “Press here to lock end”, that you can push into the box and that will hold the roll of foil for you. If you ask around, I think you’d find that a lot of people don’t know this, and that can’t mean that everyone’s an idiot. Don Norman, in his book “The Design of Everyday Things”, discusses the idea of helplessness in the scenario and concludes that in such a case in this, you’re not an idiot: there must be some flaw in the design.

Not just Reynolds Wrap, but a lot of other saran wraps, freezer papers, and other foils—not all of them, but several of them—have these tabs. It’s not quite universal, but people in Germany and Australia and probably other countries do have these sorts of tabs on the sides of their foil and saran wrap boxes. Hopefully it may someday be a learned affordance, but it won’t be when the visibility of the tabs is so low that so many people have never noticed these tabs before.

In consideration of alternatives, I can think of three obvious ways to alter the box. The first is to just have a built-in bar that the roll is held by. This, however, is very inconvenient in several ways: some people don’t want to use the tabs at all, and always want to take the whole roll of Reynolds Wrap out of its box to place large sheets on whatever they’re covering, and with a bar there’s no option for that. Also, it’s more expensive for the producer to build a bar—regardless of the simplicity of its material. Lastly, when you’re done with the wrap it’s difficult to disassemble the box in order to recycle it.

Secondly, when researching the common opinion on the matter at hand, many people seemed very frustrated with why Reynolds Wrap didn’t come with the tabs already pre-pressed in. In my opinion I see that as, potentially a good idea, but still people might want to remove the foil from its box when wrapping larger things. Having the tabs pushed in is probably the preferred stage for the majority of users, but I see it as for design purposes that the box comes looking new and clean without any rips or indents in it yet. In Papanek’s “Design for the Real World”, he discusses whether it’s important for the object to look good, or just to work well. In this case, the Reynolds Wrap container can not only work well, but it can also look good by merely leaving the step of pre-pressing the tabs in to the user of the product.

Lastly, the design I find most preferable and also least expensive for the producers (they wouldn’t have material for implement a new bar-holder, and wouldn’t have to add a new machine to push in the tabs of all Reynolds Wrap) is one where the box points the tabs out much more clearly. This would immensely improve the whole problem of bad visibility with the box. Right now “Press here to lock end” is written very small, only at each small end of the box. I wouldn’t have seen it unless I explored the box in its entirety. Even people who do know of this implementation might forget that it exists. Making it written, possibly at the front tab of the box with arrows pointing to the ends, or making the edges brighter and highlighting the tab, would make it noticed a lot more by users.

In addition, when I tried it out the first time, I removed the roll of foil out to try it when the box was empty. The tabs are harder to push than maybe the average user would like, and you have to keep the roll of foil in the box when you press them because if you do it like I did, you’ll have to undo at least one of the tabs to fit the roll back in. Furthermore, even these tabs don’t work as well as you might want them to—sometimes the roll of foil can get stuck, similar to when you in the past may have tried keeping the roll in the box by pressing both sides and pulling.
Sources

For opinions on who has seen these tabs, I asked friends and looked at http://www.staceyasnacksonline.com/2008/12/did-you-know-this_19.html. Pictures taken of my own roll of Reynolds Wrap.