

How do you dispose of a disposable nappy?



If you are the parent of a baby you might well ask. If you are a 'disposable nappy' manufacturer, you would certainly need to have a better answer than presently exists. Waste disposal is a very popular subject in the media, in community groups, in local government and even in school debates.

Much valuable issue and crisis management work for consultants and lobbyists is created by waste. Waste makes work. We love it (not the waste ... the work).

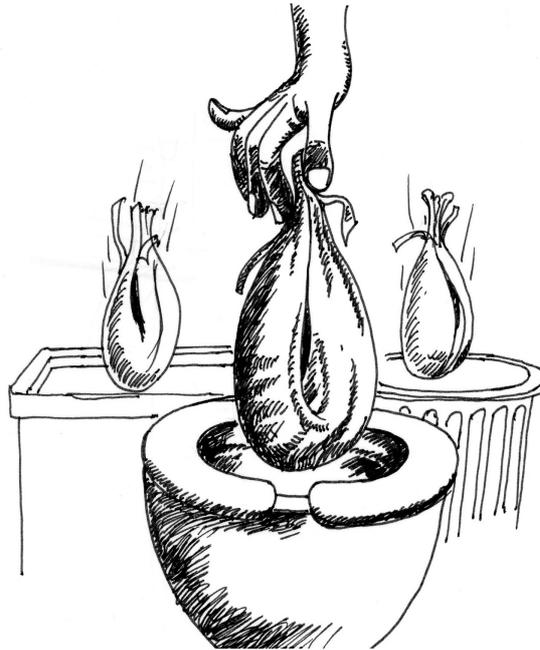
But as global citizens we hate it because we know that mankind is using up the resources of the planet. The public's growing interest in environmental responsibility is both welcome and laudable. The speed with which local action groups arise when waste goes on the agenda would make an F1 racing driver envious. But if you were in the disposable nappy business, you would still be looking for a formula to make your claim of disposability work. Put it this way: A few years ago there were four easy ways to get rid of a dirty nappy:

1. Put it in the rubbish
2. Flush it down the loo
3. Burn it in the incinerator
4. Smuggle it down to the Council bin in the park.

Let's just look at those:

It is illegal to place what an ancient law called 'nightsoil' in the family garbage bin. Garbos (Australian slang for 'garbage collector') and their unions frown very severely on this practice. They'll refuse to handle your refuse if you do (isn't English a weird language?)

1. You're not to flush it down the loo. Your sewerage authority and your plumber don't like that. The nappies can get stuck in the bendy bits and then you'll suffer.



2. The Environmental Protection Agency has stopped all that backyard burning which pollutes the atmosphere (it's even worse than cars). If they catch you doing it, they will probably punish you.

3. Burn it in the incinerator and they'll probably burn you.
4. Very naughty to use communal bins for your personal rubbish. You're breaking several rules if you do that (and item 1 above covers it anyway).

So what can you do with the darling baby's soiled nappy? Well, I'm told that the best way is to take the offending article to the loo, hold one end and flush the contents down the hole. You then take the nasty wet smelly 'disposable' item, wrap it nicely and then put it in the garbage.

Well, I would have thought that would upset the garbos and their union too. Probably give them the horrors.

My solution to all of this was to stop having children and fortunately there are some good ways to achieve that (see the chapter on IUDs).

Readers who need more advice on this, should send their question with a self-addressed envelope inside a plain brown wrapper to the Family Planning Association.

Melbourne ... capital of the nightsoil disposal issue

PPR was engaged by a disposable nappy manufacturer to deal with this problem when the garbos' union complained about the nasties going into household garbage bins in Melbourne.

Long negotiations ... no satisfactory answers. But careful lobbying enabled the manufacturer to continue to trade in the offensive articles and the garbos turned a blind eye to the disposal problem. While we were engaged on this fascinating endeavour, an even greater issue arose.

Making personal hygiene napkins ... sanitary.

I still marvel at the detail, but I swear this really happened. Our client, whose name is being withheld to protect the innocent, decided it was time for a product upgrade. The marketing and design people decided to introduce a blue plastic liner to replace the clear liner previously incorporated in the product. The blue liner was to make the napkin look whiter than white. It was marketed as a better product at a premium price.

Shortly afterwards the local water, sewerage and drainage board contacted the company and sought a meeting. Seems that the napkins were flushed into the bay in those halcyon days (Ah! One wonders where they all finish up now?) Once the water and the waves got to them, the nappies broke up pretty fast. Trouble was that the liners occasionally floated on to the beach.

The debate as to who was to blame was quickly abandoned and in a true spirit of win-win compromise, the sewerage folk suggested that the manufacturer discontinue using the blue liners as they were so easily identified for what they were.

‘It wasn’t so bad when the liners were clear,’ they said, ‘cause then you didn’t know what they came from. They might have been ice cream wrappers or something equally innocent,’ they said.

The client was reluctant to accept the idea of going back to clear liners. Too much money and marketing effort had been spent in creating and launching the new premium product. The lateral solution, of which Edward de Bono might have been proud if it had been less unsavoury, was:

An enterprising Research and Development chemist suggested using a light-sensitive ink to print the new blue colour on to the

offending plastic liners. When the water and sun hit the plastic, the blue ink quickly faded. Everyone was happy with that and the liners looked like ice cream wrappers again as they landed on the beach!

It leaves something to be desired, doesn't it? Happily the statute of limitations protects the subject now, but at the time, the client and the authorities were fortunate that the media didn't get hold of the story ... I certainly felt uncomfortable about the result and probably should have blown the whistle.

The real problem, apart from the questionable decisions and motives of the protagonists, obviously was to stop parents flushing sewage into the ocean. Time and better environmental practices are beginning to deal with that.

It does, however, leave the original question hanging: How do you dispose of the undisposable? Or would it have been better not to mention the unmentionable?

Afterthought:

Some time after the 'disposable nappy' project, I was invited to speak on crisis management to a conference of dairy producers. My presentation tried to say that the best way to avoid crises is to deal with the issues. I gave many examples. But the next speaker got a great deal more attention.

He told us that in a violent hailstorm that struck Sydney causing massive damage to homes and factories, his company, a manufacturer of personal hygiene products, faced a difficult problem. The hail broke through the roof of the warehouse that stored the products ready for delivery around the country.

When the rain hit the products they expanded to many times their size and completely blocked access to the warehouse! The company had to fly in replacement supplies from overseas to fill the retail pipelines while they worked out how to dispose of the disposables. (The End)

Ideas to make you flush!

- In an ideal world seek solutions that deal with the real problem
- Question the client not only how to overcome the immediate problem but what to do about the real issues long before the public and the media focus on them and you have a crisis on your hands
- There are ethical and moral questions around this story. For more, go to Google and find out what environmental impacts are contained in the manufacture and 'disposal' of 'disposable' personal hygiene and nappy products
- It's tempting to say 'If you don't want to blow the whistle, don't do the job' but ...refusing the work takes guts. And it takes financial security.
- Trying to convince all involved that 'doing it right is the right thing to do' is a very tough call. I'm not proud of the way I handled this one.