

Pandemic Online Shopping Surge ? Good or Bad?

By **Martina Rowley**

As soon as COVID-19 lockdowns began in 2020, when stores and malls were shutdown and later seen as unsafe shopping environments, many Canadians turned into eager online shoppers. Food stores, clothes stores, bookstores, sporting goods etc. and most retailers in general, big and small, either increased or started online sales of their products (referred to as e-commerce).

According to Statistics Canada, e-commerce sales more than doubled in 2020, compared to 2019, and increased more among non-essential retailers, who previously sold mostly from bricks-and-mortar operations. Trade sectors, such as furniture and home furnishings stores; sporting goods, hobby, book and music stores; as well as clothing and accessories stores, first saw substantial in-store sales decreases between February to April 2020 (between 70 to 85 per cent loss. Bad), followed by the biggest increases in e-commerce sales (between 83 to 191 per cent growth. Good). This was, of course, because non-essential trade sectors were mandated to close, therefore becoming more dependent on e-commerce to survive.

The company that seems to have benefited most from the pandemic e-commerce surge is retail giant Amazon. Twelve months into the pandemic, their first-quarter profit in 2020 had more than tripled over the year to date. While online spending in 2022 has dropped somewhat, this massive increase of online shopping with home deliveries of purchased goods also causes a massive environmental impact.

With Amazon holding the biggest market share of e-commerce in America, at almost [39](#) per cent, they are also the biggest culprit. You have probably experienced it yourself or need only go on YouTube and search the keywords ?packaging fails/failures? to see the mindless waste of thoughtless packaging efforts. Other online retailers are probably not much better. Too many items arrive in ridiculously oversized cardboard boxes, when a much smaller box or a padded envelope would suffice. What on earth are these retailers' guidelines and staff training on appropriate packaging?

A good thing is that carbon emissions were, in fact, lower when masses of shoppers had to stay home, the new armchair shopping habits instead created a wave of packaging materials that are destined to end up in landfill, incinerators or the open environment. In addition, return rates for online purchases are three to four times higher than in-store purchases, which then probably null and void initial carbon savings, by extra trips to the post office or courier pickup point.

The bad thing was that the online shopping surge created a glut of padded mailers, shrink wrap and bouncy air pillows mostly made from the type of plastics that present an even bigger concern for environment.

Oceana, an international non-profit organisation focused on protecting and restoring the world's oceans, conducted a study in 2021, which found that Amazon's e-commerce generated 599 million pounds of plastic packaging waste in 2020. Their air pillows packaging alone would circle the Earth more than 600 times!

The environmental group further estimated that in the same year, up to 22.44 million pounds of Amazon's plastic packaging ended up in the world's freshwater and marine ecosystems; ?roughly the equivalent to a delivery van's worth of plastic being dumped into major rivers, lakes, and the oceans every 70 minutes.? (December 2021 report, ?Exposed: Amazon's enormous and rapidly growing plastic pollution problem?).

I find that a truly staggering amount of plastic waste and a grossly unacceptable level of pollution?generated by just one company! Plastic is a major source of our pollution in general, and specifically devastating when it ends up in our oceans and seaways, where it becomes a health and life issue for marine wildlife, and in the end impacts human health when plastic particles break down into small pieces and end up in our seafood.

Amazon's recycling promises remain empty words. Claims that their plastics are ?recyclable? are misleading, because most

municipal waste management and recycling facilities do not have the capability to process plastic wrap, plastic air pillows or Styrofoam 'peanuts'. This is one of the big 'greenwashing' claims we, as consumers, are told by producers, being made to believe that placing their packaging in our recycling bins will make it 'go away' safely and be reused as a new product after it is processed. While recycling is theoretically possible in many cases, it just is not the case with many plastic and other packaging materials.

What retailers, and especially market dominating companies like Amazon, should be doing is package items in appropriately (i.e., smallest possible) boxes or protective and recyclable envelopes, use easily recyclable materials and encourage bundling of items that are ordered by the same customer to avoid their excessive and non-recyclable packaging waste. Ideally, our provincial and federal governments would also mandate that any company, especially large or medium sized, are responsible for their packaging and disposal thereof. This has been the case in the European Union since 1994!! Their Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste includes design requirements, recycling targets, a producer take-back responsibility and more.

What everyone can do: Of 1,400 Amazon Prime customers surveyed by Oceana in the US and the UK, 94.8% say they were concerned about the impact of plastics in the oceans and 91% felt that Amazon should reduce its use of plastic packaging. They want the retailer to offer plastic-free packaging choices at checkout. To sign a petition that asks Amazon to do so, go to [Change.org/PlasticFreeChoice](https://www.change.org/p/plastic-free-choice). What also helps reduce packaging and waste: Shop local!