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PERSONAL JOURNAL.

The Puncture Wound I Got for Christmas

*Theft Prevention Behind Rise
In Hard-to-Open Packaging;
'World's Worst Paper Cut'*

By JENNIFER SARANOW

THIS CHRISTMAS, Reena Russell treated herself to a new hand-held computer. After that, she treated herself for the nasty cut that she got trying to open it.

It is an increasing holiday frustration: Packaging that is so tough to remove that it leads not only to aggravation, but also the occasional cut, abrasion or puncture wound as people use their hands, teeth and the occasional steak knife to liberate their gifts. Market-research firm Envisioneering Group says this year it has seen a doubling of customer complaints that electronics gear is too frustrating and time consuming to open, compared to a year ago. (The Seaford, N.Y., firm interviews consumers as they leave stores.)

Ms. Russell's palmOne hand-held, for instance, came in a clear plastic "clamshell" with



Don't try this at home: For tips on opening stubborn 'clamshell' packaging, see Page D3.

welded seals. But the 28-year-old New York energy consultant was unable to rip it open, so she hacked off the top with scissors and struggled to pry the two sides apart—also impossible. Finally, she cut a circle around the entire perimeter, only to slice her middle finger on a jagged plastic edge.

Elapsed time: 10 minutes.

"It was very annoying," she says. "When you are buying something that is really expensive, you don't expect it to be hard to take out of the package."

The device's manufacturer, palmOne Inc., says it redesigned its packaging earlier this year to make it easier to open, but Ms. Russell had bought an older version.

In effort to limit the toll on their customers, some companies are starting to redesign their packaging. In June, Hewlett-Packard Co. rolled out new packaging for some inkjet cartridges made of thinner plastic easier to open with scissors. PalmOne's new packaging—while still a clamshell—now features "cut here" scissor markings showing how best to get it open. Last September, iRiver, a maker of handheld music and video players, started packaging its newest products in boxes rather than the tough-to-open clamshells.

But despite the pitfalls, tough-to-open plastic packaging is soaring in popularity among manufacturers and retailers. One of the chief reasons is that the unwieldy packages make it harder to steal ever-smaller electronic gadgets. The U.S. retail industry loses \$46 billion a year to theft, according to Ernst &

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HOME & FAMILY

A Puncture Wound for Christmas

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Young. As a result, retailers "absolutely demand that the packagers do whatever they can to make it difficult to steal their products," says Mary Ann Falkman, editor-in-chief of Packaging Digest, a trade publication. Next year, Sony Corp. plans to move its hard-drive players out of boxes and into what it calls "easy open" plastic packaging (it has dotted lines showing where best to cut it).

PalmOne, for one, says its packaging redesign earlier this year was tailored to reduce retailer "shrinkage," a euphemism for stealing. Best Buy Inc., one of the biggest U.S. electronics retailers, encourages vendors to use blister and clamshell packaging, says Paula Baldwin, a Best Buy spokeswoman, partly to reduce theft.

Best Buy now keeps its iPod music players behind glass. Apple Computer Inc.'s iPods, one of the season's hottest gifts, come in easy-to-open boxes. Best Buy moved them under glass after seeing an increase in thefts when the music players were out on shelves.

Demand for high-visibility packaging such as clamshells and blister-packs—where the plastic is attached to cardboard—rose 28% to \$5.6 billion in 2003 from \$4.4 billion in 1998 according to Freedonia Group, a market-research firm based in Cleveland.

Kelly Mack, a 35-year-old marketing manager in the Cleveland suburb of Lakewood, Ohio, was helping a niece open her Christmas gift (a fairy princess outfit

The backlash is forcing some companies to redesign their packaging.

with magic wand) and ended up with "the world's worst paper cut" when she tried to jam her finger between a tough-as-nails slab of plastic and sheet of cardboard and pry them apart—and raked her left index finger along an edge. The half-inch gash is "like no paper cut I've ever had in my life," she says. "It's like the biggest paper cut, the deepest."

George Karagory, an emergency-room doctor at St. Joseph Hospital in Kokomo, Ind., saw about four hand lacerations this Christmas from packaging and presents, including a young boy who cut himself opening a videogame player.

Richard Aronwald, an emergency-room physician at Evanston Hospital in Evanston, Ill., says this Christmas he

Opening a Clamshell

Step one: Use a pair of scissors, not a knife (which can slip on plastic).



Step two: Cut all the way around the perimeter, inside the 'weld' where the two pieces of plastic are fused.



Step three: Avoid cutting just one or two of the sides before pulling open the package, because edges can be sharp.

had to give five or six stitches to a dad who stabbed himself with a knife trying to open his kid's gift.

Cuts like these are already among the most-common household injuries. Last year "unintentional cut/pierce" ranked as the fifth most common cause of a non-fatal unintentional injury, according to the Center for Disease Control. (It ranks just below "unintentional overexertion" and car accidents.)

Packaging is the culprit more often than you might think. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, there were about 1,400 cases nationwide in 2002 where "plastic wrapping products" led to a visit to an emergency room. A few case descriptions from the safety commission's data: "Patient opened a compact disc, thinks plastic wrap hit eye, contusion;" "using a steak knife to open plastic wrapper and cut finger."

This month is one of the most common times to get injuries like these. "They can happen sporadically throughout the year, but Christmas is certainly the classic day," says Robert Suter, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

The backlash is forcing some companies to redesign their packaging. Earlier this year, Thomson Inc., whose brands include RCA, added perforations to some of its blister packaging to make it easier to tear open. Sony's "easy-open" packages were developed directly in response to research showing that its older plastic packages were hard to open, says Koba Kobayashi of Sony. In addition to the "cut here" scissor markings, the Sony packaging now also has instructions warning customers not to use knives.

Of course, points out Graham Cox, a packaging consultant in Surrey, England: "People don't actually read instructions," he says.