

# How to move a mountain

## MEC looks for ways to be more sustainable

**ALWAYS** looking to improve its already award-winning sustainable practices, national outdoor retailer Mountain Equipment Co-op is currently redesigning its packaging.



“Although our packaging is already pretty sustainable compared to other retailers, we are embarking on an adventure now over the next few months to try and make it even more so,” says MEC creative director Judy Snaydon. “And wherever we can, that’s going to mean no packaging at all if we can help it.”

MEC sent out an RFP in search of a local Vancouver design firm with experience, or an interest, in sustainable packaging techniques. It has chosen Bau Wow, whose proposal was handwritten on a reusable notebook. One of Bau Wow’s first tasks is to solve a recurring problem with MEC’s recycled-content cardboard boxes or sleeves. Customers like to remove items from these containers to take a better look but when they attempt to return them, they often tear the packaging in the process.

## Dry runs

### Waterless printing leaves a cleaner impression

**LET’S** face it: printing is not an environmentally friendly process no matter how you approach it. However, waterless printing or dryography is said to be a gentler alternative to conventional offset lithography.

In wet offset, a fountain solution is used to prevent ink from adhering to the non-image areas of the plate. Some fountain (or dampening) solutions are water-based and contain isopropyl alcohol, a volatile organic compound that is harmful to the environment. (Now most wetting agents use an alcohol substitute with a considerably reduced amount of VOCs.)

In waterless printing, the non-image area of the plate consists of ink repellent silicone. In the image area, the silicone has been removed, either by photo-imaging or scribing, to expose the ink-receptive photopolymer layer beneath. This design allows the plate to selectively attract and resist ink without the use of water or alcohol. The temperature must be carefully controlled to ensure the inks maintain their optimal viscosity. This prevents the ink from spreading onto the non-image areas of the plate and allows it to transfer properly onto the substrate.

Glenn Laycock, sales manager at Warren’s Waterless Printing in Toronto, says this technique is both an environmentally and technologically superior method that produces higher-resolution printing thanks to the removal of water from its process.

“Water can dilute the ink and make it bleed into the substrate,” he says, “causing an increase in dot gain.” Also, ink sits on the surface of a conventional printing plate whereas on a waterless plate it is slightly recessed, which helps prevent an increase in dot gain when the ink is pressed onto the paper. What’s more, he adds, dryography is available at the same price as conventional litho.

**Contact:** C.J. Graphics, Toronto, [www.cjgraphics.com](http://www.cjgraphics.com); PacBlue Digital Imaging, Vancouver, [www.pacblue.net](http://www.pacblue.net); Warren’s Waterless Printing, Toronto, [www.warrenswaterless.com](http://www.warrenswaterless.com)

MEC is also reconsidering the material used to produce its gift cards, currently made from polystyrene. It is testing a corn-based bioplastic from NatureWorks to see if the substance is in fact biodegradable. MEC did the same thing with its BioBags when a designer took one of the shopping bags home to compost.

MEC’s directional store signage was recently overhauled. Previously manufactured using Sentra, the signs are now being printed on polystyrene and marked with the P6 recycling logo so that staff can identify them when they are ready to be recycled at the Canadian Polystyrene Recycling Association facility in Mississauga, Ont., which also accepts its polystyrene gift cards. MEC’s in-store graphic signage is being converted to JER Envirotech panel board, made from wood waste and plastic.

“We’re constantly looking, and challenging our suppliers to look for us and find better materials. So we’re improving at a pace but we are a business and it has to remain practical,” says Snaydon. The environmental alternative is not always the perfect solution. Printed images on the polystyrene don’t look as good as those printed and then adhered to the Sentra. “You have to strike that balance between having things look as great as they can possibly be or do they not look quite as good but are better for the environment.”

There’s no doubt, says Snaydon, it’s not easy being green. “I think for designers in particular it can sometimes be frustrating because it does close as many doors as it opens. So you do have to adjust your thinking quite a bit in terms of what’s available to you.” **Contact:** [www.mec.ca](http://www.mec.ca); [www.naturalworksllc.com](http://www.naturalworksllc.com); [www.biobag.ca](http://www.biobag.ca); [www.cpra-canada.com](http://www.cpra-canada.com); [www.jerenvirotech.com](http://www.jerenvirotech.com)

