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Baring it All for the Environment

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The EPA has declared that indoor air can actually be more toxic than outdoor air—but one Des Moines company is trying to change that. Naked Binder, which celebrated its second anniversary in November 2010, specializes in binders, folders, and labels made from 100 percent post-consumer waste (mainly newspapers and magazines), which are more environmentally friendly both to produce and to have in homes and offices.

“Vinyl is really toxic. It’s off-gassing—that ‘new binder smell,” says Savannah Herr, who calls herself the Director of Awesome on the Naked Binder team. Vinyl is the material in a traditional binder that gives it flexibility. However, it is also toxic to produce and difficult to recycle. Though some recycling facilities will accept it—if you can manage to separate it from the rest of the materials in the binder—most will not, and have to throw away an entire batch of recyclables if it is contaminated with vinyl.

So, many binders that tend to wear out after a year or so end up in landfills, where they are susceptible to fires and the vinyl becomes even more toxic.

A Naked Binder, however, is easy to recycle when that time comes. The binder itself is all one piece, and the metal rings can be popped out and recycled separately. “It’s so much healthier for the planet,” Herr says. People just shouldn’t use vinyl,” Herr says. However, don’t plan on needing to recycle one of these any time soon. The binders have been mechanically tested, and Herr estimated it would take more than thirty-four years to wear one out if you opened and closed it twenty times a day. “They’re super-super strong,” Herr says. Yet, Naked Binders are competitively priced because they are made from one bent piece of material, which eliminates waste from the production process. Traditional binders are made from three pieces of cardboard then slipped into a vinyl covering, which has to be crimped, trimmed, and discarded.

The company was founded on that idea of making simple, reliable products. Over Thanksgiving dinner, Ken James was commenting to his father, Fritz, about a plain, coverless binder that he’d had for years. Fritz, the owner of Library Binding Service, which has specialized in binding since 1868, saw an opportunity. Since then, Ken has managed the company. “It was slow to take off within the first year,” Herr says. “The hangup with any new company is getting your name out there.” However, she said that it has continued to grow, and has especially taken off in the last couple of months. The company sells nationally and internationally online. “Canada just has a huge green initiative,” Herr says of one of their biggest international customers. European countries also tend to be environmentally conscious, as well as Australia—however, the company hasn’t been able to ship much to the land down under yet due to high prices. But Naked Binder has no intention of slowing down any time soon. “Really, we want to become the standard. We want people to use our binder because it’s so great—there’s no waste, and you can use it for years,” Herr says.

To purchase Naked Binder products, visit nakedbinder.com or the ISU Bookstore, where prices start at $5.99.