Cut the Slack

Slack fill may not be the biggest problem with packaged foods, but it’s one of the most irksome. Slack fill is when we break open a package and find it only half full (though the net weight is accurate).

Some packages (of potato chips, for example) have air to protect the contents from being crushed. But excessive “nonfunctional” slack fill is against the law.

Unfortunately, the law is riddled with loopholes and doesn’t seem to be enforced. Granted, the Food and Drug Administration has higher priorities, like preventing the contamination of spinach or peanut butter. But couldn’t the FDA assign just one person to crack down on some of the worst violators?

If the FDA and state attorneys general can’t or won’t stop this kind of deceptive packaging, perhaps retailers could step up to the plate and tell their suppliers to stop the trickery.

If consumer deception isn’t grounds enough for change, there are plenty of environmental reasons. Trucks could carry more packages if manufacturers squeezed out the air. And we’d all have more room in our cupboards at home.

In 2007, Walmart told its suppliers that it would only sell concentrated detergents. Over the next three years, the retailing giant expects to cut out more than 80 million pounds of plastic resin, 430 million gallons of water, and 125 million pounds of cardboard. Similar savings could be had in the food aisles.

Here are a few good examples of slack fill. If you’ve got more, please send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

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Why does Stouffer’s put one quesadilla in a box that could easily hold two?

Sugar-free Jell-O takes up less space, but Kraft uses the regular Jell-O box.

Let’s hope you’re not expecting a crowd for dinner.