

Back-to-schoolers have a new cool in school supplies: biodegradable

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It may be less crucial for the kids to have Iron Man or Hannah Montana's images on their back-to-school supplies this fall than it is to have a currently far cooler word stamped on the stuff: biodegradable.

More than a decade after recycled paper started to become a serious factor in the \$55 billion back-to-school market, the new buzzword for 2010 appears to be biodegradable (i.e., an item that will decompose in a landfill or in your garden compost pile).

Perhaps the biggest name that, for the first time, is rolling out biodegradable products this year: Paper Mate, with new biodegradable pens and mechanical pencils. Other, smaller school- and office-supply makers are hawking everything from biodegradable rulers to pencil cases.

"We hear continuing responses from [consumers](#) about their desire to be more environmentally friendly," says Marc Colavitti, vice president of R&D at Paper Mate. "I'd find it hard to believe that, within 10 years, every category out there won't have at least 25 percent to 30 percent of their offerings more environmentally friendly."

The trick is convincing folks that it's worth typically paying a premium - and that the quality is good. "There's a perception that things like this are somehow of lower quality," says Nedra Weinreich, a social marketing consultant. "Some feel if they buy biodegradable, they might not be getting the best they can get."

Executives at Paper Mate say that's one reason they've gone with a more upscale (\$1.70) pen- with an added clip and grip - than the economy stick pen for the biodegradable pen. Another reason is that they couldn't make budget biodegradable pens at a low enough price, Colavitti says.

Paper Mate worked overtime on the packaging to tout the pen's biodegradability. It shouts biodegradable "in your own back yard" in letters almost as big as the Paper Mate logo. It shows a picture of a green Earth with a green tree sprouting out of it. And on the back of the pack are detailed directions on which parts are compostable - and which are not.

The pen should rank among Paper Mate's top 10 back-to-school products, projects Ailinh Hoang-Kim, senior brand manager. The brand's biodegradable mechanical pencils sell for \$2.70.

Some small companies have sold biodegradable school supplies for several years.

Among them, C-Line Products sells [biodegradable](#) page protectors, project folders and pencil cases. Company executives are ecstatic that Paper Mate is on board.

"If top brands do this, it brings more attention to the category," says Skip Robertson, executive vice president at C-Line. "It gets people used to seeing it and to understanding the benefits."

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