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A Primer on Effective Consumer Education Strategies

The success of a community recycling program hinges upon public participation and acceptance. Effective consumer education is essential.

Most consumers are eager to recycle plastics. **All** plastics. What they often fail to recognize is that plastics are a family of materials with distinct characteristics that must be preserved through the recycling process. Just as municipal recycling programs collect aluminum can but not aluminum siding, not all plastics will be acceptable in your collection program. Your education campaign must generate and sustain public enthusiasm while helping consumers recognize which items go into the recycling bin.

The recommendations presented here are derived from real-world experience, highlighting the most effective consumer education strategies from recycling programs around the country. In addition, the American Plastics Council (APC) has conducted extensive focus group testing to determine what kinds of educational materials best help consumers understand their important role in the recycling chain. Following are APC's recommendations in a number of different areas:

I. Three Stages of an Effective Public Education Program

Initial announcement

Let the public know exactly when your collection program will begin or change. Two weeks' advance notice is recommended. If you allow too much lead time, consumers may save up large quantities of material that will swamp your program in the first few weeks.

Direct-mail brochures or fliers dropped off at households are most effective in making the initial announcement. Television and radio public service announcements, newspaper articles and handbills are also effective. Communicate with young residents through the public and private school systems. Neighborhood or condo associations also are effective conduits of information.

Kickoff campaign

Plan to begin the program with a substantial promotional campaign. Hold a kickoff event and coordinate print, radio and local TV coverage. Get local politicians and celebrities involved. A successful start means making sure that the community sees, reads and hears about the program, knows how to participate and understands what is expected of them

Continued education and reminders

Remind residents about how and why they should participate in your

recycling program. Reinforce recycling habits by keeping the public apprised of the results of their efforts (such as tons of materials diverted from landfills and disposal costs avoided).

Use follow-up opportunities to give consumers a refresher course on proper recycling procedure and call attention to any common mistakes you have noticed since the kick-off.

Also, remember that residents move in and out of neighborhoods with some regularity. Consider putting together a packet of information including recycling tips to welcome new renters and homeowners to the neighborhood.

II. Four Key Principles for an Effective Education Program

Project identity

Give your program and education campaign a consistent, professional "look." This will reinforce the official nature of the program and foster public goodwill. And, remember, other professionally designed and produced materials are competing for the public's attention.

A logo specific to your recycling program is a good way to attract the attention of local residents. Use the logo for promotional materials, signs at drop-off centers, collection vehicles, household containers, employee uniforms, etc.

Consistency

Try not to change program parameters once you've gotten started. A consistent program that is reinforced over time will maximize the level of participation. Conversely, frequent alterations to collection program instructions may produce confusion and decrease the level of participation.

Clarity

Clear and simple recycling instructions will enhance participation and the quality of the collected materials. Use big pictures and few words. Avoid technical terms such as "resin" or "polymer." Reinforce written instructions with explanatory graphics. Most people will look at the instructions for perhaps 10 or 15 seconds; they must be able to grasp the directions at a glance. Small children and non-readers will rely on your illustrations alone.

Make sure you address the basic issues

- What materials should be set out? Be very specific. Provide lists of products that should be included and those that should be excluded.
- How should they prepare the material? Remove and throw away the caps? Rinse the containers? Separate the materials? Squash the bottles?
- When should they set out the materials?
- Where should they take materials (for drop-off programs)?

- Who should they call for more information?

Consider offering a telephone number for consumers to call if they are interested in learning more about the technical aspects of your program.

Also consider printing the list of acceptable and non-acceptable items on a single panel of the brochure that could be clipped and posted on a refrigerator, for example. Many communities distribute their instructions on magnets, encouraging families to refer to them regularly.

III. General Guidelines for Promotional Materials

APC has refined its consumer education strategies through extensive research. We've tested and retested our promotional materials to identify the kinds of information that help consumers understand their role in the recycling process and the best means of delivering that information.

Based on the findings of these and other research efforts, APC suggests the following guidelines for implementing a consumer education program:

- *Headlines.* A direct call to action has the most appeal. Most people are already interested in recycling, so you don't need fancy titles or cute gimmicks to get them to read the brochure.
- *Text.* Use simple, direct language. Easy to follow, step-

by-step instructions should tell consumers exactly what plastics to save for recycling and how to prepare them for collection. Some people are interested in more background information-why your community is recycling, what happens to the collected plastics, etc.-but this information should be kept separate from the step-by-step instructions.

- *Graphics.* Pictures help communicate your messages to younger readers and non-readers. For that reason we suggest you keep your artwork simple and easy to understand. We've also found that people take recycling very seriously and prefer informational materials that are serious, as well. APC has developed downloadable camera ready art that can be cut and pasted into an "instant" promotional brochure for your plastics recycling program.

Include a list of "do's and don'ts."

This list should clearly indicate which plastics should go in the recycling bin and which do not. A "do" list alone is not enough; consumers want you to be as specific as possible, so specify "don'ts" as well.

Educate thoroughly. Consumers prefer to receive information at their home, either through the mail or using additional materials, such as door hangers and flyers dropped into curbside recycling bins. You can also promote your program through your own website.

Consumers overwhelmingly want feedback if they are not preparing their plastics correctly. Feedback tags printed with a simple checklist of common preparation mistakes can be quickly filled out by the collection crew and dropped into the emptied recycling bin. In addition, the offending item should be left in the recycling bin with the feedback tag. Your collection crew is essential in sending out a consistent message to consumers. Train your crew before the program begins-and at regular interval thereafter-so that they clearly understand what to reject and the importance of giving households constructive feedback.

IV. Effective Communication Tools

Direct Mail Brochures.

Brochures delivered through the mail are more likely to receive attention than those hung on a door or dropped in a recycling bin. Use the guidelines listed on the preceding page in developing your brochures.

Brochures should be printed on recycled paper (and should say so) to reinforce the message of your program.

Media.

The local media provide an ideal opportunity to generate public enthusiasm for your collection program. Keep the media informed of your program's goals and successes through press releases. Consider submitting a guest editorial to local newspapers as a means of talking directly with residents. You

should also look for television and radio opportunities to discuss the program. Involve local celebrities or hold contests-especially in local schools-related to the program as a means of attracting media attention.

From a public relations standpoint, it is important to provide periodic status reports on how the program is doing. Try to develop a relationship with local media outlets and enlist their assistance in providing updates to the community.

If your collection program is a pilot not covering all the collection routes within your community, remember that the media will deliver the same messages to both households served and to households not served by your pilot project. Make sure the media is aware of this consideration and informs the public accordingly. Because of the media's broad reach, pilot programs typically have to rely more heavily on direct mail and other communications.

Community Information Resources.

Consumers often ask their neighbors for information on plastics recycling. By providing complete information to community organizations, you can make sure that information is available. You should also consider making information materials available to schools, churches, libraries, neighborhood/condo associations, etc.

Employee Training.

The public will expect the men and women staffing your collection crews, drop-off stations and sorting facilities to be experts on recycling. Invest the time to fully explain the goals of your collection program and to emphasize the importance of these employees as a link between your program and the community.

Your employees should also be encouraged to keep you informed of common mistakes made by recycling households, as well as any questions or complaints from residents on their routes.

Telephone Information Line.

An information line provides the public with easy access to answers to their recycling questions. Make sure that your operators have all of the information they need to answer consumer inquiries about both the specifics and general philosophy of your collection program. Operators should also be prepared to explain why certain grades or types of a given material are being collected while others are not. This is especially important in the case of plastics, although it applies to all common recyclable materials.

V . Answers to Common Questions About Plastics Recycling

Why Are There So Many Different Kinds of Plastics?

Six Plastic resins make up roughly 98 percent of all consumer product packaging: PET, HDPE, vinyl,

LDPE, polypropylene and polystyrene.

Each resin has unique properties that make it ideal for making a particular kind of package. For example, the plastic wrap used for meat packaging is permeable to gas, keeping meat red and fresh-looking. Plastic soft drink bottles, on the other hand, are designed to prevent gas from passing through in order to maintain carbonation. HDPE is resistant to corrosive cleaning products while polypropylene is used for closures (cups) because of its strength and flexibility.

Should I Use the Resin Identification Code to Educate Consumers?

Plastics must be sorted by resin type before recycling to increase their value and ensure the quality of recycled resins. In 1988, the plastics industry developed a voluntary resin identification system for plastic containers to help the recycling industry.

The code was intended for use by recyclers (the people actually doing the sorting at the recycling facility), not consumers. Therefore, if you choose to educate consumers using the codes, you must use caution. Recycling programs that encourage consumers to refer to the codes often wind up collecting unwanted resin and container types. (This is similar to asking for "office paper" if all you want is white office paper.) To avoid this, make sure recycling instructions are as specific as possible. For example, specifically

request "bottles with necks marked 2 on the bottom" to avoid getting tubs and containers marked with a number 2. Or, if your market accepts only soft drink bottles and milk jugs, ask for only those products that don't mention the resin name or code at all.

Why Can't My Recycler Take All Containers Made with the Same Resin?

Certain resins are used to make a variety of containers. However, depending on the end product, the same resin type may have different properties that make it incompatible when recycled for use in other end products. For example, resin code #2 appears on many types of both blow-molded containers (bottles) and injection-molded containers (tubs). Blow molding requires plastics with low viscosity, or melt-flow index (MFI) while injection molding requires plastics with a higher viscosity, or MFI. To maintain these properties in recycled resin, the two container types must be processed separately. It may be that your plastics recycler processes only blow-molded containers. Be sure to check carefully with your market(s) before telling the consumer what you want to collect.

Quick Hints

Let the Consumer help you!

You can play a major role in making plastics recycling cost-effective. Urge households to crush plastic bottles to save room in the collection truck and, if you want only plastic bottles,

tell them to "check for the neck."
Click here for APC's downloadable camera ready art. For additional information on APC's cost optimization activities, call 1-800-2-HELP-90.

Start with your market!

The first step in setting up any recycling program is identifying a market (or markets) and making arrangements for the transfer of collected recyclables. Only after you and your market(s) have reached an agreement will you know exactly what items should be collected and how residents should prepare the materials. Your market(s) should be able to help you compile an accurate list of acceptable materials and prepare instructions that will meet their needs.

The APC's toll-free hotline, 1-800-2-HELP-90, can provide the names of plastics handlers and reclaimers in your area that could potentially provide markets for the plastics you collect. Beginning September, 1999, you can also download this information directly from the web.

Be specific!

Avoid using terms like "plastics" or "glass." You might end up with garden hoses, flower pots, window

panes and drinking glasses. If you want to collect plastic bottles only-no tubs, cups or other containers-tell consumers to "check for the neck" and recycle only those containers with necks smaller than their bases.

Quality counts!

Many consumers are intent on recycling as much of their waste as possible. This may lead some individuals to try to test the limits of your collection program. For example, a household might include a margarine tub in their recycling bin even though the collection program in their area does not yet accept this item. Collection crews should leave these items in the bin with an appropriately marked feedback tag explaining why they were not acceptable. Otherwise consumers will continue to include non-specified items that may be viewed as contaminants by your market.

What about drop-offs?

If your community operates drop-off collection facilities as part of its recycling program, APC can offer valuable tips for lowering contamination rates and maximizing material quality. "Perfecting the Plastics Drop-Off" is available on our website.



community recycling kit



▶ recycling section
▶ plastics resource

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Perfecting the Plastics Drop-off

People are eager to recycle and many are willing to take their plastic containers to special drop-off centers if their communities cannot provide curbside collection. With clear, simple instructions and convenient, well-designed sites, householders will readily separate, prepare, and deliver market-quality materials.

Even communities that already collect plastics at drop-off sites can improve their success by making a few low-cost, common-sense changes in their collection strategies. Whether you're starting from scratch or fine-tuning an existing program, the American Plastics Council offers the following practical suggestions that can help you meet your recycling goals.

I. Location, Location, Location!

Even the keenest recyclers are more likely to participate if drop-off sites are easy to access.

- Drop off sites should be clearly marked, attractive, and easy to read. Try to place facilities on well-known, heavily traveled streets or intersections to attract both frequent and occasional travelers. (You can get information about traffic patterns and volume from local planning or public works departments.) Distinctive signs at major intersections will help direct people to the site.
- Look for potential sites in high-density population areas. (Again, local planning departments or state commerce departments can furnish population and demographics data.) Residents and businesses in districts without nearby recycling facilities may welcome a well-designed and well-maintained drop-off location.

Plan the site layout with convenience in mind.

- Allow plenty of room to park and unload recyclables; a drive-through arrangement is ideal.
- Provide adequate lighting for evening users.
- Place clearly marked trash containers beside the recycling bins for unacceptable materials and incidental waste. Empty these trash containers regularly to avoid overflow and litter.

II. What They Know Is What You Get

The public's understanding of material requirements can make or break a drop-off program. People must be thoroughly familiar with which containers are acceptable before they arrive at the site, or they may deposit unacceptable materials just to avoid taking them back home for disposal.

III. At Home

Leaflets or posters for home use will help people select and prepare material correctly.

- Use simple, active language in instructions.
- Explain why certain materials are not acceptable in order to help people make decisions and lower contamination.
- Combine written and visual elements in printed material. APC has developed downloadable camera ready art that can be cut and pasted into an "Instant" promotional brochure for your plastics recycling program.
- Specify exactly which containers (not resins) are acceptable; avoid using technical names such as "HDPE" or "polystyrene."
- Also specify "bottles with necks" if you don't want to receive tubs or other containers. A list or graphic depiction showing "Yes" containers on one side and crossed-out "No" containers on the other can be particularly helpful in the decision process.
- Be sure to include a telephone number to call for additional information.

Depict the containers as you want them delivered. For example, show bottles emptied with caps removed.

IV. At the Site

When people arrive at a drop-off site, they need to know exactly what to do. They'll generally be in a hurry, so signs, graphics, and instructions should be visible, brief, and easily understood. Signs, facility layout, and container design should not only encourage appropriate action, but also deter incorrect action.

Make sign instructions clear and specific. A sign calling for "Plastics only" or showing the resin identification code is likely to be interpreted as "any plastics" and that's just what you'll get. Show specific examples when possible.

If signs picture acceptable and unacceptable items, make the two groups readily distinguishable from one another. Use bigger, brighter illustrations for the "do" containers or perhaps show "don't" items in black and white, or fit them behind the familiar red-barred NO symbol.

Paint collection bins with bright, attractive colors. Use consistent colors and graphics at all sites to promote awareness and participation.

Set up your bins so that they are user-friendly and conducive to proper participation. Many people find lids heavy and awkward to hold while they place materials inside the bin. This encourages them to "bulk unload" (i.e. to toss recyclables into

the bin in the boxes and paper or plastic bags used to transport them or deposit their bags of containers next to the bin). This not only introduces contaminants or litter in the form of bags and boxes, but also prevents double-checking to make sure that their individual containers are acceptable.



Cutting a 12-inch diameter hole (big enough for a 2 1/2 gallon water jug) in the collection bin lid both eliminates the need to lift and forces recyclers to deposit containers one at a time. Circle the hole with a bright-colored warning, such as "Stop! Not for all plastic!" Then, direct attention to a graphic or list showing acceptable containers. To further discourage bulk unloading, lock the bin's access door.

Make sure a trash bin is handy and clearly marked for "trash only." Paint the trash containers a different color from the recyclables bins.

Keep the site clean and tidy. Overflowing trash and collection bins attract pests, annoy neighbors and property owners, and discourage participation. If necessary, clean the site daily and arrange for more frequent trash pickup and recyclables collection.

signs- how the look and what they say
are the key to a successful drop-off program

DO

SIGNS

- Use large signs with large lettering.
- Use bright, high-impact colors.
- Use graphics and pictures to convey information.
- Label items pictured.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Be specific about what is and what is not acceptable.
- Ask people to rinse containers well.
- Ask people to remove caps and throw them away.
- Provide a telephone number for questions.

VI. Summing up

Drop-off plastics recycling can be a cost-effective alternative to curbside plastics collection, without sacrificing product quality. With strategic siting, forceful signage, and minor bin modifications, the public will consistently deliver material comparable to what would be expected in more costly curbside programs.

Most people consider two miles a convenient driving distance to a drop-off site, especially if it's near a destination point such as a busy

DON'T

SIGNS

- Use many words.
- Picture acceptable containers with caps attached.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Use language like "all #1's and #2's," unless you want bags, cups and other non-bottle containers.
- Use vague words like "plastics only."
- Use the resin identification code unless you follow the guidelines suggested in "A CAVEAT ABOUT CODES."

supermarket or convenience store. Retailers may find a recycling site attracts drop-in traffic, and shoppers simply put bagged recyclables in the car, along with the dry cleaning and the library books, as part of the weekend errand circuit.

VII. A Caveat About Codes

The resin identification codes - now mandated in 39 states - were developed at the request of recyclers to facilitate plastics sorting at the recycling center.

Some communities, however, have attempted to use the codes in community education efforts, which often leads to problems. Consumers may look for the code only, not looking to see if the container meets other criteria, such as "bottles with necks only."

Whenever possible, drop-off signs and educational materials should emphasize precise descriptions of acceptable containers - using the resin identification codes only when required by markets.



You might also want to consider signs that can change as your markets change. The display case shown here holds actual products (acceptable and unacceptable ones) attached with Velcro. A holder for educational brochures is located below the display case.