



Buying Recycled Products: Consuming Wisely

How to make recycling work at home, at work and in the community

Spinning Wheels

Have you ever tried to ride a bicycle with one wheel? The bike does not go anywhere. That is what recycling is like when we just collect materials such as aluminum, glass and paper for curbside pickup or to drop off at recycling centers. Although collecting material is important, if no other steps are taken, the material does not go anywhere.

Recycling requires the whole cycle to be complete including preparing recycled materials to be used by manufacturers, manufacturing products from recycled material and selling and buying recycled products.

Buying recycled products could be considered the most important part of the cycle because manufacturers respond to what consumers demand. When people buy recycled products, recycling works.

Shopping Wisely

The first step to recycling wisely is to shop wisely. Be aware of what recycled products are available. Look for the recycled symbol while you shop, but be aware that products with the symbol might not be made from recycled material. Some products that carry the symbol are made from materials that can be recycled, but may have no recycled content. For instance, many plastic containers have the recycled symbol with a code number inside the symbol. The code identifies the type of plastic resin from which the container is made. However, the presence of a recycling symbol or the code does not mean the product is made from recycled material or can be easily recycled locally.

Many stores have labels on shelves noting if a product or its packaging is made from recycled material. Some packages have the recycled symbol with the word recycled on the package, indicating that at least part of the product or its package has been made with recycled material.

Some products do not advertise the fact that they use recycled material. Most cardboard boxes used for cereal, cake mixes, crackers and other similar products have been recycled. If the inside of the box is not white, it probably has some recycled content. Egg cartons made from a fibrous material probably have been recycled.

The list of recycled products does not end at the grocery store. It ranges from park benches made from plastic milk jugs to insulation made from newspapers. There are re-refined oil and recycled paper, ski jackets and welcome mats.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources' Solid Waste Management Program has a partial list of recycled items that can be purchased in state. Another source is *The Green Consumer* from Penguin Press.

Buying Recyclables

One more thing to consider while shopping is the items that are collected for recycling in your area. Find out what the neighborhood curbside recycling program or nearby drop-off centers will accept and buy products they take. That way, you can keep the cycle going.

For instance, suppose a collection center accepts plastic milk containers. You might consider milk in plastic containers rather than cardboard unless they also accept cardboard containers.

An Extra Mile

To do a little more to encourage recycling, try some of the following activities.

Speak or write to store managers to ask them to provide more products made from recycled material.

Speak to local officials, the mayor, city council, public works or school board members and ask them if they use recycled products. Find out if they take advantage of the program that allows them to use state government contracts to purchase recycled products. This cooperative purchasing helps lower costs of products, making it possible even for the smallest local government or school districts to take advantage of the economy of scale.

Find out which products use pre-consumer and post-consumer waste in their recycled products by asking store managers, salespeople or manufacturers. Pre-consumer waste is waste that the manufacturer creates and then reuses. It is a wise use of resources, but would probably be done even without recycling programs. Post-consumer waste has been purchased by consumers, used by household and then put out for curbside recycling programs or dropped off at recycling centers. This is waste that would end up in landfills if not for recycling. The higher percentage of post-consumer waste a product contains, the better.

Start a recycling program at work. No one can buy recycled products if businesses do not make them, so this program should include purchasing recycled products as well as collection. Whatever product a company produces, there probably is a way to use a recycled material to do it. If the business does not manufacture a product, it still can use recycled paper in letterhead, copiers or newsletters. Other recycled products to consider are rubber mats, plastic lumber, cardboard, insulation and others.

For more information

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