



BUSTING PLASTIC RECYCLING MYTHS

BY KEEFE HARRISON

Keeping up with expanding plastic recycling markets can be a full-time job! Read on for a guide to resolving common plastic recycling misunderstandings.

What we all knew about plastic recycling just a few years ago may be very different today. The changes that come as the plastic recycling industry matures, grows and adds new technology is a sign that this industry is nimble and growth-focused. That's a good thing. But it also means that recycling officials have a considerable, ongoing job comparing how well their collection programs match local recycling options and conveying current recycling details with the public. First up on many outreach to-do lists? Taking on recycling myths and reducing plastic recycling confusion.

Myth #1: Public disinterest can't be overcome

We often hear that public apathy is the key limiting factor when it comes to recycling. All Objection! When we look around our recycling landscape we must first test for strong access to recycling before we can rule on public disinterest alone. Ready and consistent access, in full-sized containers, with clear signage results in boosts in volumes of recyclables collected. The public is about as green-focused as they've been in the past 20 years – the willingness is there, but the bin, in many parts of the country, frequently is not. Confusion about what goes in the cart, inconsistent messaging and limited access do not add up to a supply-boosting success story.

All this is to say that confusion over what and when to recycle is often a key barrier to overcome when tackling timid recycling rates. As the world of plastic packaging changes, so does the world

of plastic recycling. Local recycling officials have a tricky job of not just staying up-to-date with marketplace developments, but also selecting which of those new elements are important for public consumption.

Myth #2: Leave the caps off

When it comes to caps, marketing advances have presented an operational about-face. The recycling industry announced it's now okay to keep the caps on and the industry will make the most of them. But the industry also understands that transition won't be a uniform or quick one. Recycling officials choosing to embrace the change then need to fully adopt the practice through operational details and public education approach. For some communities, it'll be an easy shift. For others, it will be more challenging.

Bottle caps are a wonderful example of how a change in demand has different levels of impact along the material recovery chain. To the public, the decision to leave caps on or off can be confusing enough to dissuade participation in recycling. To the recycling coordinator, it is understood that those caps and lids are often a different resin type and most know that different resins need to eventually end in different reprocessing lines (frequently at different plants) if they're going to be recycled successfully. The materials recovery facility (MRF) is concerned about compaction, contamination, sortation and bale price. However, over the years, plastic recyclers have figured out a way to sort that cap and lid material so that resin streams stay true. That upgrade process has gone so well

that the valuable cap material has an active end market

Myth #3: Doesn't it take more energy to recycle?

We've all heard the challenge before, "So after my peanut butter jar gets rinsed, hauled, sorted, hauled again, ground, cleaned, reprocessed, and then hauled yet again to make into a new product, there's no way that it saves energy to recycle." It's a conceivable challenge. Fortunately, a 2010 life cycle inventory showed for every pound of recycled PET flake used instead of virgin, energy use is reduced by 84 percent, and GHG emissions are reduced by 71.1 percent. The LCI was conducted by Franklin Associates, Ltd and jointly sponsored by NAPCOR, the American Chemistry Council (ACC), the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers (APR) and the PET Resin Association (PETRA).

Myth #4: Plastic only gets downcycled

For some, the true test of recycling is to see that a bottle tossed in the bin returns to a bottle form again. For those people, Pepsi's success in reaching its goal of having 10-percent recycled PET content in bottles should be proof that the bottle-to-bottle cycle is active. Further along those lines, the Food and Drug Association has issued more than 150 letters of non-objection for food-grade recycled resin since 1990 and, currently, 16 U.S. PET processing facilities are termed bottle-to-bottle for their ability to make that food-grade PET.

Beyond the basic question if bottles can go back into bottles is the larger concept that the bottle is, or should be, the highest use of a material. From durable goods like carpet, automobile parts or clothing such as the uniforms worn at last summer's Olympics or Nike's World Cup jerseys made from Unifi's Repreve yarn, not to mention the hungry bag and film-to-decking market all represent not just technical advances in

reprocessing and manufacturing and show true marketplace demand for material. When we see recycling as a step in generating manufacturing feedstock, not just as an effective tool in reducing material going to the landfill, we more clearly understand this competitive marketplace sourcing recycled resin into any number of goods.

Know what else is interesting about those recycling and remanufacturing examples? They're all examples of jobs here in the U.S. making U.S. products. Marketing officials teach us that while environmental guilt isn't a good tool for increasing recycling participation rates, this idea that today's yogurt tub can be tomorrow's paint can does.

Myth #5: Only bottles have domestic markets

Recycling officials report a growing public sentiment for curbside programs to accept more types of plastics. Growing domestic capacity for film, tubs and bulky rigids is matching public demand for increased recycling options. As communities partner with MRFs and haulers to expand their plastic recycling palettes, questions continue as to the end-of-life options for non-bottle materials.

Several industry-targeted initiatives shed light on the growing domestic non-bottle recycling capacity. APR's focus on grocery store recycling is designed to reclaim the estimated 350 million pounds of back-of-store rigid plastic containers currently unrecovered. Driven by North American plastics reprocessors, it's an indicator of strong domestic markets for material. Similarly-targeted efforts include ACC's dedicated work on film recycling access and the Foodservice Packaging Institute's efforts to drive recovery of plastic and paper take out containers.

Myth #6: Whatever, it all ends up in the landfill anyway

This is perhaps the most frustrating recycling misunderstanding out there. NAPCOR reports the PET capacity in our country has hit 1.75 billion pounds a year. That's not happy little recycling thoughts, that is supply and demand at work. What's good about demand? Competitive prices and even more reason to keep our natural resources out of the landfill. And yet our recovery rates have all-but-plateaued. What's the biggest problem for recycling now? Say it together: supply. Bust this myth and it will help the supply come.

MRFs will bust the myths

As packaging and technology changes, so will recycling. With that comes the knowledge that our job as plastic recycling mythbusters will continue. When re-tuning messages to reflect changing recovery trends, keep in mind that myths and misunderstandings don't lie just with the public. The smoothest path to effectively adopting to programmatic change is one that engages not just the community, but also the hauler, the MRF and, at times, the reprocessor. While it's easy to think of the plastics recycling industry as a single thing, it is in fact a collection of sectors. Contrary to the ideal, those sectors do not always enjoy clear paths of communication. Success rooted in long-term marketability of materials is found when communities actively engage haulers and MRFs to ensure smooth transitions and long-term marketability of material. 

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