

Building Public Confidence in Recycling



Jekyll Island | October 29, 2025

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of Americans say:
***“Recycling very
important”***



World Economic Forum; *The Climate Progress Survey*; November 2021; US gen pop (n=1253)



of recyclables go
to the landfill



Accelerating Behavior Change to Achieve a Circular Economy; 2023 Knowledge report

Reason Given for Not Recycling:

“Don’t believe items actually get recycled”

18%

All age groups

50%

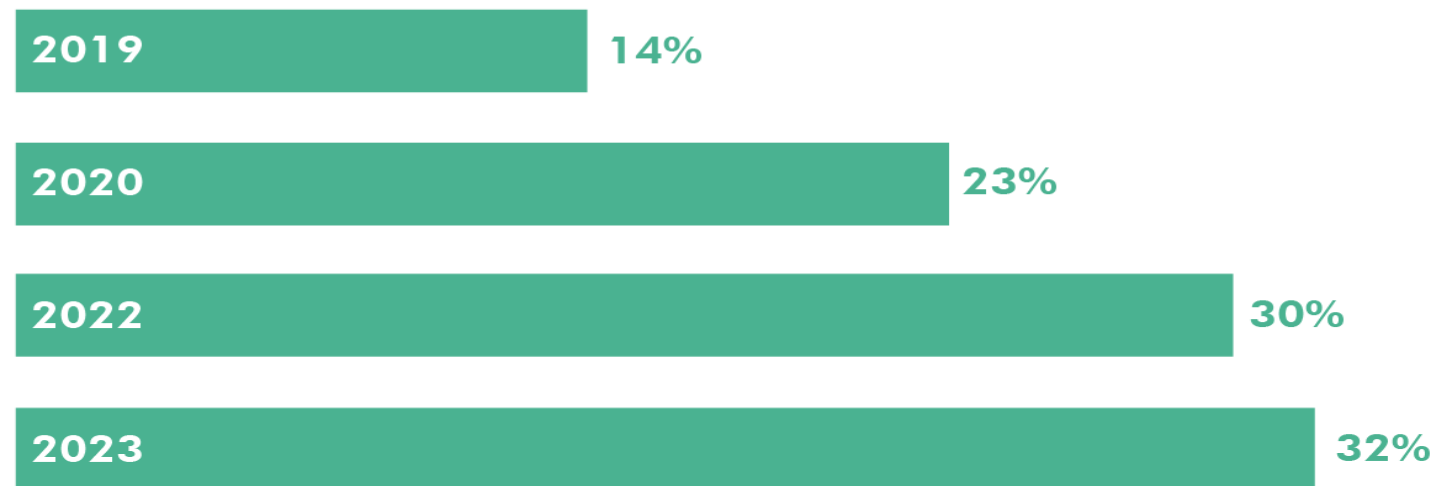
18 to 24 year olds



“How confident are you that items you toss in recycling bin *actually* get recycled?”



Not very or Not at all:



Shelton^{Grp}

Shelton Group, *Recycling Pulse* (n= 1000)

Messages People Are Hearing

Recycling is:

- Hopelessly contaminated
- Going to the landfill
- Uneconomical
- A fraud, industry greenwashing



GREENPEACE

The Atlantic

The New York Times



96%

Express confusion about recyclability



Consumer Brands Association,
Reduce, Reuse, Confuse, 2019 (n=2000)

Recycling Behavior is Complex

5 Types of Recyclers	Eco Activators (25%) 	Committed Followers (24%) 	Discouraged Self-Doubters (18%) 	Detached Abiders (16%) 	Conflicted, Overwhelmed (16%) 
Segment Tendencies (but not exclusives)	45+ yo, higher income & education, larger home, more Asian, fewer Black	45+ yo, higher income, average race/ethnicity mix	18-64 yo, lower income & education, smaller household, more Black	45+ yo, small households, more conservative	18-64 yo, mid-upper income, larger household, more Hispanic, Black, Asian
Inclinations	Social, Emotional	Private, Practical	Private, Practical	Private, Emotional	Social, Emotional
2 groups	MORE DEDICATED		LESS DEDICATED		
Feelings about recycling	Passionate Proud Hopeful Confident Connected	Importance Responsibility Confident Intentional Community	Guilt Worry Confused Doubt selves, process Resent no support	Guilt Unsure, confused Feel required Doubt benefits Resent non-recyclers	Passionate Judged Anxious Too much effort Resent warnings, fines
Behaviors around recycling	- Research and teach - Social - Overcome issues	- Organized - Consistent - Productive	- Defer to labels (pkg, bin) - Inconvenience = barrier - Likely new to recycling - Recycle limited items	- Organized - Defer to gov, friends, not packaging or tech - Low effort, interaction	- Research, teach others - Defer to digital, friends - Don't go out of the way
Motivations around recycling	to make a difference , protect the planet , and having a system	by values, believe recycling is the right thing to do . They create solutions.	by reducing waste but doubt their knowledge and the importance of recycling.	doing their civic duty to their community is important, personal gain , sunk cost (paid for)	by hope for helping the planet and self, being more organized, having support and assurances
Avoiding	FOOLISHNESS	WRONG	WRONG	DISAPPOINTMENT	FOOLISHNESS

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Feelings
about recycling

Proud

Connected

Hopeful

Responsibility

Intentional

Importance

Passionate

Community

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Feelings
about recycling

Worry

Resent warnings, fines

Resent no support

Unsure, confused

Anxious

Guilt

Judged

Feel required



The Recycling Partnership

Building a Better Recycling System

Center for Sustainable Behavior & Impact

2022 Foundational Audience Segmentation Research

5 Recycler Portraits Reveal the Importance of Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Public Engagement

Why This Matters

The success of recycling depends on the small, everyday actions of hundreds of millions of people across the country. And it's no surprise that people's recycling performance varies significantly due to diverse beliefs, barriers, and behaviors around recycling as they interact with factors both at the system level and household level.

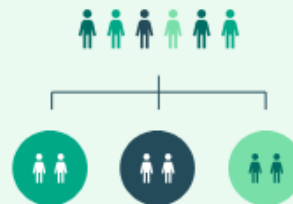
While segmenting people from a purely demographic view may be simpler and more convenient, it does not align with the motivations driving recycling behavior and the barriers to recycling right. Unlike demographics, psychographics point us toward trends for overcoming barriers and leveraging motivations. Through learning people's self-perceptions, identities, values, beliefs, and lifestyles, groups that share similarities (or segments) begin to emerge.

By understanding the psychographics of our audiences, not just the demographics, we can make more strategic investments in meaningful communications and tools to reach people where they are, with the tailored support they need. To begin this process, we partnered with Ipsos to gain insights on the experience of recyclers in single-family households. Our work defined and sized different audience segments with an emphasis on learning the parts of the recycling system each segment finds most frustrating and the beliefs that prevent them from recycling everything they can.

This initial segmentation research uncovered five segments of barriers and beliefs across demographic and geographic boundaries that provide a way to understand different types of recyclers.

Segmentation

Dividing people in distinct groups with distinct characteristics to target them with different solutions and in different ways.



Confidence Starts with Communication

Of residents that see more news about recycling,



said inclined to make more of an effort.



Only 1 in 4 recall getting local recycling info in past year



FOODSERVICE PACKAGING
INSTITUTE®

Foodservice Packaging Institute; 2022
Resident Messaging Survey Findings



The Center for Sustainable Behavior and Impact;
Confidence Index; June 2022; US gen pop (n=3000)

Confidence vs Trust

Confidence: Rational judgment

- Does recycling system actually function?
- Does my effort result in positive outcome?

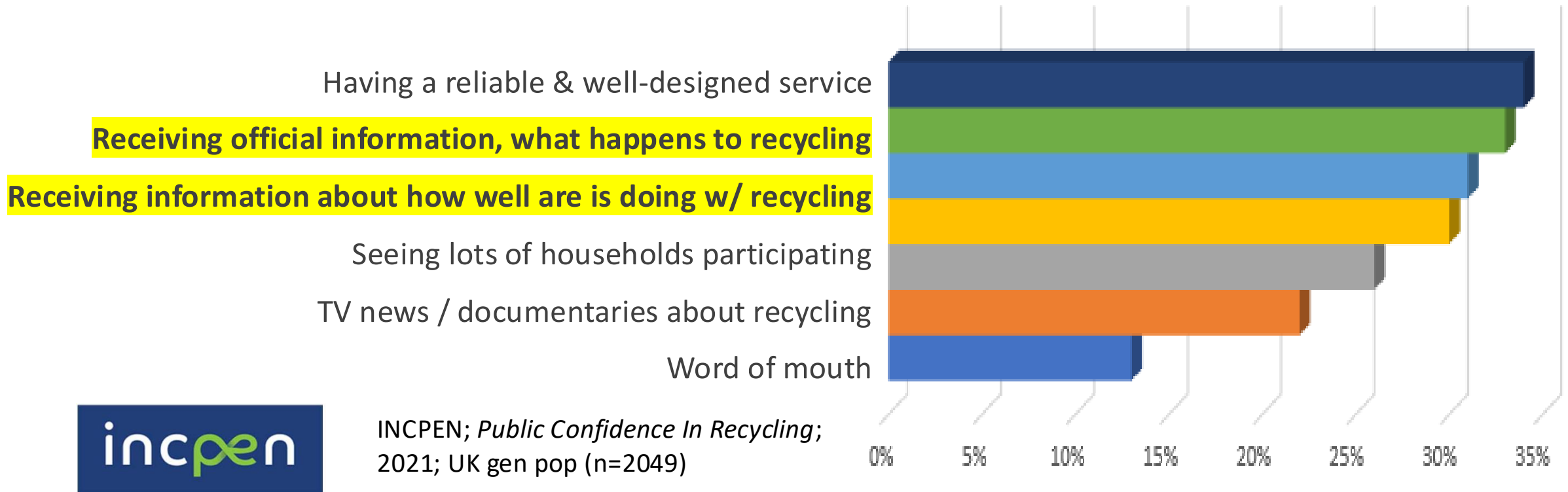
Trust: Emotional judgment

- Credibility gap
- “Fraud” – Recycling doesn’t deliver on promise



Messaging to Build Confidence

UK Research: What has positive influence on your confidence in recycling?



Tell the Story of Recycling

- Show how recycling works
- Evidence that it is real
- Context to explain sorting rules
 - Why somethings aren't recyclable
 - Why rules change over time



Tell the Story of Recycling

Show what things get recycled into

GREIF



Shaw
FLOORS®



MOHAWK



Tell the Story of Recycling

- **Positive impact of Recycling**
 - Jobs created
 - Economic impact
 - GHG reductions
- **Connect their effort to a result**
- **Connect recycling to their values**





Recycled Materials
Association
Sustainable. Resilient. Essential.



ECONOMIC IMPACT	
	\$4,869,431,800
TOTAL JOBS	
	18,086
TOTAL WAGES	
	\$1,300,102,100
TAXES	
	\$495,798,200



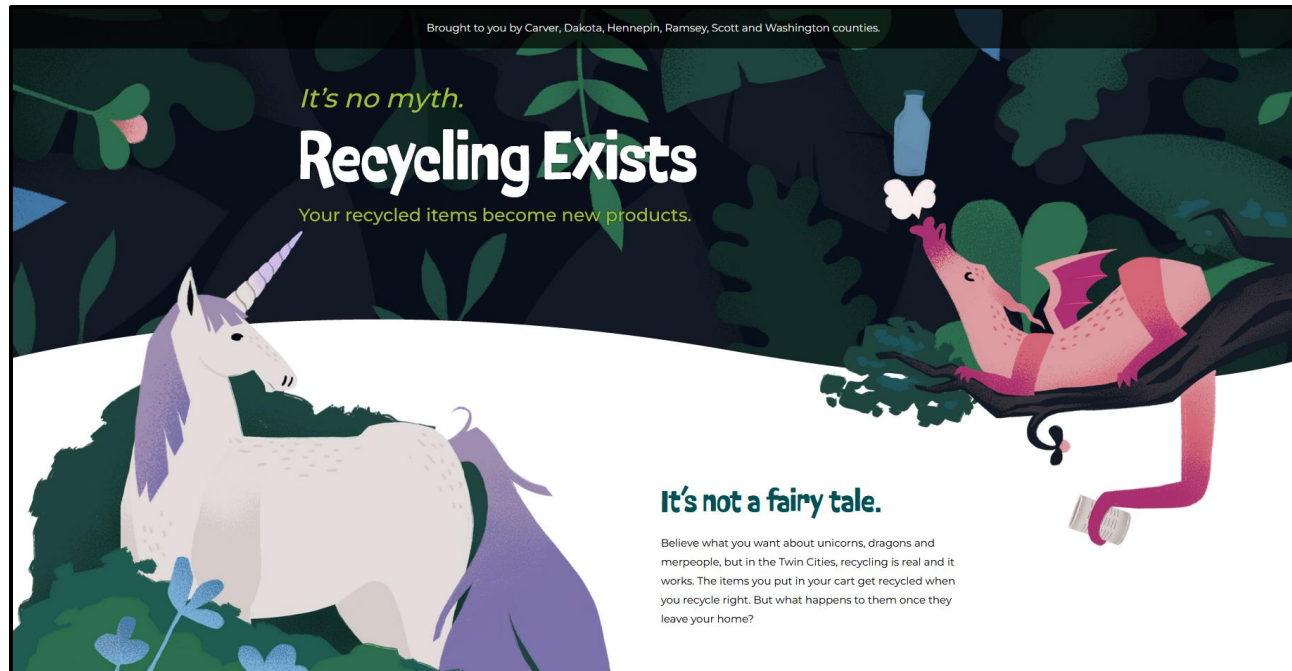
I want to be



King County, WA Metro Area



Twin City, MN Metro Area



Where does our recycling go?

Recycled cans, bottles and paper are taken to a local facility where people and machines sort the recycling into material types, which are sent to many different companies to be made into new products. Beyond saving energy and protecting natural resources, recycling supports vital industries in Minnesota and across the country. Explore what happens to your recycling:

Paper and cardboard

Paper mills like [West Rock](#) in Saint Paul mix paper and water together to make a pulp, which is then flattened, dried and rolled into new boxboard. The boxboard is used to make cereal and cracker boxes.

Cartons

Metal cans

Glass bottles and jars

Plastic bottles, containers and jugs

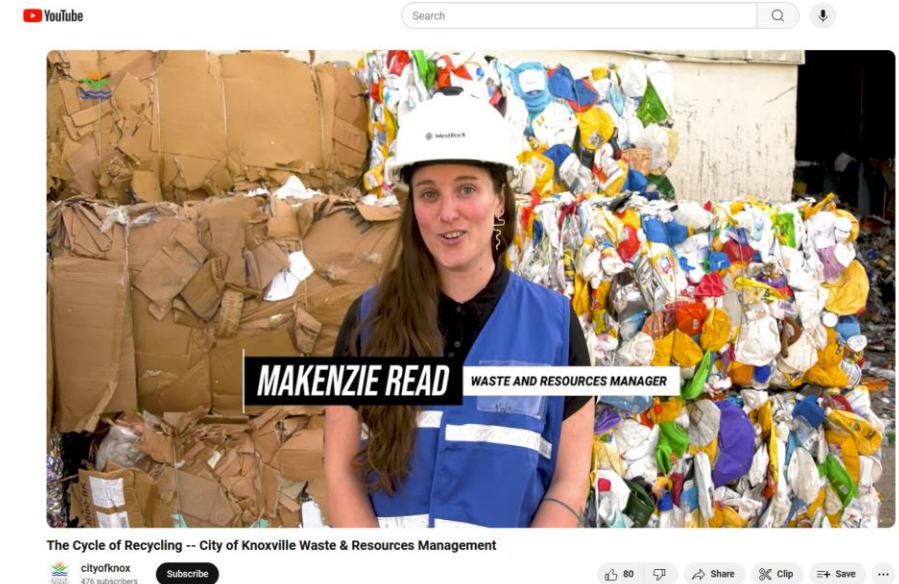


The Twin Cities recycled
525,335 tons
of paper and cardboard in 2021.

[Minnesota Pollution Control Agency](#)



MRF Tours & Videos



Speak to Your Audience

- Rally the Team
- Validation
- Empathy
- Be authentic; Speak to values
- Transparency





YouTube

Search



Recycle with Waste Management: The Mayor's Table: Episode 26



City of Farmington, New Mexico
401 subscribers

Subscribe

1



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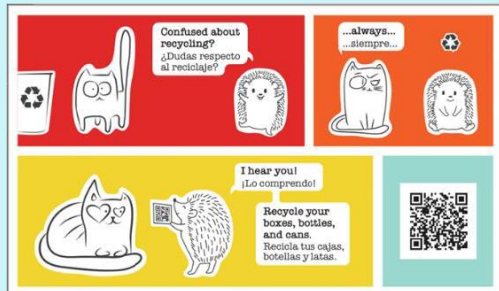
Acknowledge Confusion



Pilot study

Cart tag message: Destigmatized confusion

Results: 38% increase in recycling tonnage



**Confused about recycling?
You're not alone.**

Visit recyclerightny.org



Community Ambassadors

- Train volunteers to speak to community groups
- Leverage credibility of “neighbors”

Examples: [Portland](#), [Flagstaff](#), [Laporte County, IN](#)



Validate Their Effort




YOUR BOTTLE MEANS
JOBS



Transparency



<https://recyclerightny.org>

LET'S BUST SOME COMMON RECYCLING MYTHS!

MYTH "It's made of plastic, so it must be recyclable!"	MYTH "Whatever, they'll sort it out at the recycling facility!"	MYTH "What's the point? It won't actually get recycled!"
+ TRUTH + WHY	+ TRUTH + WHY	+ TRUTH + WHY



Understand your Audience



Focus group: Anti-contamination message eroded confidence among high-achieving recyclers.

What resonated: Transparency about recycling system.

96%

Express confusion about recyclability



Consumer Brands Association,
Reduce, Reuse, Confuse, 2019 (n=2000)

Inconsistency Creates Confusion



Inconsistency Creates Confusion



Power of Branding



Different Rules & Messaging



PLASTIC RESIN IDENTIFICATION CODES						
PETE	HDPE	PVC	LDPE	PP	PS	OTHER
Polyethylene Terephthalate	High Density Polyethylene	Polyvinyl Chloride	Low Density Polyethylene	Polypropylene	Polystyrene	Other
Recyclable	Recyclable at specialized plants	Recyclable at specialized plants	Recyclable at specialized plants	Recyclable at specialized plants	Recyclable at specialized plants	Recyclable at specialized plants



Recycling's Brand(s)



Recycling is always on stage...



We need to
think like
Steve Jobs:

**Focus on the
user experience**



Case Study: Peoria, AZ

2021 study tested different collection routes

- Before: Recycling = Brown; Trash = Tan
- After: Blue lid on recycling + education flyer
- 20.3%* lower contamination



Branding Harmonization Case Study



The logo for the City of Fort Collins, featuring the text "City of Fort Collins" in a white serif font, with a stylized white wave graphic underneath.

- Carts & lids use standard colors:

Trash =grey



Harmonized Regional Messaging



North Central Texas
Council of Governments



Policy

Truth in Labeling:

California: bans Mobius “triangle” logo if plastic container is not recyclable.

Extended Producer Responsibility - “EPR”:

- Consistent list – What is recyclable
- Reliable funding for education & outreach
- Statewide outreach campaign



Why It Matters



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Scan QR to access:

- This presentations
- Links to reports & resources
- Recording of 2024 webinar:

