

## Effective Methods of Communication Regarding Recycling

### Introduction

The Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that 75% of the total amount of trash Americans throw away each year is actually recyclable, but we only actually recycle 30% of it. That means that there are millions of tons of plastic, glass, and aluminum products that are sitting in our landfills, and each one of these products will take thousands of years to photodegrade. It is generally known that if we want our planet to not have enormous landfills in the very near future, we need to start making some changes to our lifestyles. There has been an increased amount of messages and calls-to-action that we have been exposed to in the media everyday, through a large variety of different mediums. And although we as a global community have gotten slightly better at reducing our waste, why are our landfills still piling up with recyclable products? Why do we constantly see people on the streets blatantly ignoring the signs and throwing away their plastic bottles and soda cans?

These are questions I have been asking myself for quite some time now. Here in Isla Vista, we are populated with a majority of college students, yet we see that there is significantly less recycling that happens in this community compared to the neighboring university campus. I have finally decided to look deeper into the roots of these issues, and in this paper I am going to compare and contrast two different communities, and how the implemented structure seems to work in one, but not the other. We will begin to recognize the methods of communication that work well to inform the public about recycling, and how these methods can be used in areas where recycling isn't a normal everyday practice.

### Plastics 101

We have all heard the numerous horrifying statistics regarding plastic, the chemicals it produces, and the effects it has on our wildlife and surrounding environment. A large imminent problem regarding waste and recyclables is that a huge amount of what ends up in our landfills are recyclable plastic products like single serve plastic bottles for sodas, water, and juices. What most individuals don't know is that these plastics are made with polyethylene terephthalate, which scientists estimate takes hundreds and even thousands of years to degrade (Ellsbury, 2012).

Microorganisms don't recognize plastic as a source of food, so they do not break plastic material down for their consumption. Instead, polyethylene terephthalate will break down through photodegradation, which means the main player is sunlight and not bacteria. The UV rays from our sun strikes the plastic, which breaks the bonds holding the long molecular chain together, thus turning big pieces of plastic into smaller ones (Ellsbury, 2012)

One recent solution to our society's problem with plastic pollution is the creation of bioplastics, which have been in production for some time now. Unfortunately, they have faced much controversy on their effectiveness on reducing the amount of waste we accumulate each year due to the very specific and often complicated atmospheres these materials need to actually decompose or break down. Also, there is a lot of conflicting and confusing information about whether which types of bioplastics are compostable and which are recyclable, as some are either both or one or the other, which makes it hard for individuals using these products to dispose of them correctly.

What makes plastic material that ends up in our landfill so horrible is that after it gets dumped into the area where all other garbage ends up, it will become covered in other pieces of trash. Therefore, it will never be able to photodegrade since these materials will never be exposed to light, and will just sit in complete darkness, indefinitely taking up space. This is why there needs to be an increased amount of education to our local communities about the consequences our actions have on our landfills and our environment, and Santa Barbara is one of the leading communities in California that is addressing this issue.

### Current Efforts

All different types of organizations locally and statewide that are focusing on defining recycling and what it means to integrate it into our everyday lives. The Community Environmental Council of Santa Barbara and the Environmental Defence Center, two local organizations, focus on informing people on how detrimental it is to throw a piece of recyclable material into the trashcan. What makes it difficult and confusing to get the message across to local communities is the fact that the materials that are recyclable differ in every county in our country. The materials accepted at recycling plants in certain cities depend on if there is the appropriate machinery available, and if there is a buy back market for the recycled product. If either one of these does not exist in that city, then that certain material cannot be recycled, and will end up in the nearest landfill. Let's take a look at how our local college campus tackles the problem of recycling.

### University of California, Santa Barbara

Most college campuses are relatively better at having a larger knowledge about what can and cannot be recycled. They are also the individuals that take the most time to think about if what they are holding is recyclable or not, and actually make the effort to dispose of the material in the proper container. This is because as students at a university, we are the future of our country and of our communities, and we pursue an education in order to help solve some of our society's most pressing problems. The study "The Efficacy Of A Theory-Based, Participatory Recycling Intervention On A College Campus" was conducted in 2013 where a few researchers wanted to increase the amount of bottle and can recycling that took place on a college campus. The study was done at a southwestern university in the United States, where there was one control building that only had outdoor recycling, and two treatment buildings that had outdoor recycling plus indoor recycling receptacles for half of the time studied (Largo-Wight, Dedee DeLongpre, Wight). Their study concluded that when there are more recycling bins that are easily accessible by students, staff, and custodians, individuals are more likely to recycle their products more frequently (Largo-Wight et al.). We can see this to be true on the University of California, Santa Barbara campus as well.

I recently interviewed Matthew O'Carroll, who is the Recycling and Water Efficiency Manager with UCSB Sustainability. His job is to oversee the departments and make sure they all coordinate with each other in order to reduce the amount of waste our campus generates. He works very closely with Associated Students Recycling, the students in charge of collecting campus recycling and creating infographics that are posted on each bin throughout campus. Not all of the landfill, recycling, and composting bins are labeled with the infographics, but the few that are around our campus are more than most cities and communities have. Since the creation of these infographics telling consumers what is recyclable and what is not, there has been a decreased amount of waste generation by the individuals at this campus. College students rank high among the people who are most likely to recycle, and that is partially because of the amount of convenience recycling receptacles that we have access to. But it is not just the amount of bins we have access too, it is also all the infrastructure we have supporting these efforts.

UCSB has a large amount of companies, organizations, and departments within our school system that work to increase our campus recycling literacy. All of them are connected with one another, and meet face-to-face at least once a week with a manager to make sure things are going smoothly, as well as to discuss things that can be improved. According to O'Carroll, many departments collaborate with each other with effective communication in order to ensure they are all working towards the same common goal. This seems to be a simple enough, well-oiled system that we have going down on this campus, but what about Isla Vista? Why do we see a large variety of students that go to UCSB and live in Isla Vista, not practicing the same recycling habits that they have on campus?

#### The Problems with IV

The main issue comes down to a lack of formal governmental representation and structure. Without a main authoritative group of people, certain issues get neglected, like the importance of informing our community about sustainable recycling practices. Although there are plenty of off-campus environmental organizations that are based in Isla Vista and are dedicated to creating a change in the community, their efforts are often ignored and fail due to lack of funding or ability to implement the ideas.

I spoke to Matthew O'Carroll about issues in Isla Vista during my interview with him about UCSB, and he gave me insight on other reasons recycling efforts fail in the community. The presence of "can faries", the individuals that walk up and down each block of Isla Vista collecting the cans that have been disposed of by college students after a night of partying, makes students feel as though they do not have to pick up after themselves. If they throw their beer cans on the floor on a Saturday night, the following morning they will all be gone because they have been collected by the "can faries". This practice, although it does provide these individuals with a source of income since they take the cans to the recycling site that is located in Isla Vista and trade them for money, makes those who throw their trash on the floor unaccountable for their actions.

So how do we make changes in Isla Vista? How do we get people to care, and not throw their recyclables on the ground? How do we make individuals implement recycling practices in their everyday lives and in their homes? I came across a handbook that outlines reasons people don't recycle, as well as solutions to these problems. It was originally created for the waste prevention campaign throughout the United Kingdom, then was edited specifically for the people of Scotland.

#### Effective Communication

Zero Waste Scotland developed a guide in 2012 on how to improve recycling through effective communication. This organization has worked with individuals, communities and businesses to lead them on the pathway towards being more sustainable by increasing their recycling literacy. In this guide, they included everything you need to know about how to change your own, your community, or your business's recycling practices by knowing your audience, the demographics, the waste disposal system in your area, and the current knowledge people have about recycling.

Then, the guide focuses on exactly why many do not feel the need to give recycling much thought. The first reason people do not recycle is because of situational barriers. If there is a general lack of recycling receptacles in your area, then you are not going to be able to recycle. Next, if you as an individual believe you are "too busy to care", or "don't want to change your daily habits", you will not be incentivized to recycle. Third, you will not recycle if you lack the knowledge on what materials can be recycled in your area and what cannot be recycled. And last, most of the time if there is no personal motivation because there is no immediate reward for your actions, you will mostly likely not want to go out of your way to recycle.

Another problem that lead to individuals not recycling is the presence of infographics that are too complicated and cluttered will cause people to simply not take the time to read the information thoroughly. Most of the time, the material that was just in their hand, whether it was a soda can or a

newspaper, will end up in the trashcan if there is no clear message about whether it can be recycled or not. Complicated signage is one of the major problems with the recycling literacy in our local and global communities, and we need to find alternatives in order to inform the public efficiently.

The reason I focused primarily on this guide is because it is the most comprehensive and easy to understand source of information I found in all of my weeks of research. Unlike news articles that just explain how a city's residents don't recycle, or scientific papers that focus on scientific reasons why plastics that get stuck in landfills are bad, or governmental websites that are dense with detailed information, this guide took everything into account-the science, the problems, and the specific details. It was the most effective analysis of open communication regarding recycling and changing regular everyday practices into more sustainable ones. Now that we have identified why people do not recycle, let's look at ways we can improve our sustainable recycling practices.

### Make it Easy

What most individuals want are simplistic messages telling them exactly what to do, while including all the information they need to do it. This means that easy city or community needs to come up with a simple infographic explaining what can be recycled and where. The most effective way to do this is to not focus on what can not be recycled in your community. If individuals are interested in what can't be recycled or what needs to be recycled at special locations, include this information on the city's website or on the websites of local environmental organizations. This also goes for print articles, online blogs, and newspapers, because if you are writing for the public, you need to make sure everyone will be able to understand your message, despite their educational background. To learn more about specific recyclables in Santa Barbara county, I looked at the "Recycling Resource Guide for Santa Barbara County", which was put together by the Santa Barbara County Public Works Department. The resource guide was extremely information dense with specifics about what can be recycled in Santa Barbara, which is efficient because it was created by a governmental department. This is the kind of guide that people can access if they have any specific questions about this county, but at the same time it is not the only available source of information.

Another way to push our communities towards more sustainable recycling practices is to make recycling receptacles easily accessible. This means wherever there are trash cans, there needs to be a recycling bin right next to them. This requires there to be more governmental funding, as many environmental organizations are nonprofit and do not have the funds to buy hundreds of receptacles for a certain community.

Lastly, personal and informal messages and methods of communication is the kind that most appeals to individuals who are not very educated on recycling. This means that on social media, websites, blogs, and posters, if the messages are informal and not very scientific, more people will stop and take the time to read them.

### So What Now?

What we have to do now, as members of the Isla Vista community, is push for more control over our small community so we can get things done. We need to be able to be in charge, so we can find adequate sources of funding for receptacles to be places all around Isla Vista, hopefully on every block. We also need to increase the knowledge of what can be recycled in curbside and household recycling bins through public service announcements and campaigns. Through these announcements, we also need to encourage people to change their daily habits, and kick their habit of being lazy and resistant. Another major idea to increasing recycling in Isla Vista is to encourage local businesses to recycle more, to have recycling bins in their buildings that are accessible to their customers, and to encourage their customers to engage in sustainable practices. This is something that Plastic Solutions, a local organization is trying to

accomplish within the next school year, 2015-2016. They are one of the many clubs that are dedicated to creating change in Isla Vista, that we as a community need to support.

Recycling is one of the easiest ways to incorporate sustainable practices within our daily lifestyles, and it is possible to get discouraged by thinking that your efforts make no difference in our world as a whole. It is easy to feel small and insignificant, but we must remember that our collective individual efforts as a whole will make a big difference in our community and the amount of waste we generate, as well as can also have a larger effect on our close friends and family. If we, the individuals that make up the Isla Vista community can create this change, we could be the motivation other communities need to start changing their recycling habits. It won't be an easy task or a simple fix, but this community is so special I think with the right tools and the right information, we can be successful.

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