

Best Practices in Resource Recovery

Container and Signage Standardization



NEBRASKA
RECYCLING
COUNCIL

Imagine if traffic signs were a different shape and color in every state, town, or city block. It would create a lot of confusion and cause accidents. Numerous studies have shown that using consistent design elements for recycling containers paired with well-matched messaging is the key that unlocks the puzzling rules of recycling.

When designing recycling programs, it is important to acknowledge that humans are creatures of convenience. Little things can make a big difference in human behavior. For example, separating recycling and trash containers by even a few steps reduces recycling participation and increases the likelihood of contamination.

Whether it be for your municipality's drop-off sites, curbside recycling containers, indoor recycling stations, or deskside, there are seven key design elements that smooth the way for better recycling.



Standardizing visual clues, such as consistent recycling station styles, placement, colors, labels, messaging, and restrictive container openings helps take the guesswork out of recycling. These practices are proven to encourage more recycling and decrease contamination in recycling bins.

CONTAINER DESIGN

Use the same style of containers throughout your domain. Once people get the hang of it in their immediate area, using like-containers anywhere else is a snap. The only exception to this rule is that "back-of-house" containers can sometimes look different from public-facing containers for practical reasons such as function, size, weight, or cost. As long as the other standard design elements are followed, this should pose no confusion for employees.

CONTAINER PLACEMENT

One of the most important aspects of successful recycling programs is placement of containers. High-traffic areas, areas in which larger volumes of materials are being generated, areas where people congregate, entrances, and exits are likely candidates for recycling station placement. A common mistake is to place recycling bins and trash bins apart from one another. This practice only encourages less recycling and more contamination in recycling bins. It is essential that every recycling bin has a trash bin at its side and that all un-paired bins are eliminated.

Recycling at Work

A "Recycling at Work" study commissioned by Keep America Beautiful was conducted over a six-month period in 2014. The study found that deskside recycling bins paired with smaller "saddle-bag" trash bins increased recycling from 65% to 85% and reduced contamination in the recycling bin by 20%. It also reduced the amount of recyclables in the trash from 29% to 13% and the amount of office paper in the trash to almost zero.*

http://recyclingatwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Workplace-Recycling-Research_KAB_2015.pdf

COLOR-CODING

While there are no universally-adopted, "official" colors for containers, labels, and signs, an informal standard has emerged.

Blue = Recycling

Black = Landfill

Green = Organics



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SIGNS AND LABELS

The instructions on a sign or label should be understood at a glance. The use of images is essential. The first task is to define what materials are being generated and likely to be discarded in the container(s). Secondly, know what your recycling processor accepts for recycling and if there are any preparations needed before they are placed in the recycling bin, e.g., empty contents, caps on or caps off, etc. Key words are important, but keep them few, simple and concise. If there are large populations of non-English speakers, it is useful to include key words in additional languages as well.

For great examples of signs designed with these elements visit:

<https://www.recycleacrossamerica.org/labels>
and <https://recyclingpartnership.org/DIYSigns/>

LABEL PLACEMENT

Place labels on collection containers for easy viewing. Eye-level signs or labels are the most effective, particularly in high-traffic areas or where there are events that draw large crowds. It will be harder to read and respond to the signage if it is low and blocked from view, making it less convenient for users to choose the right bin.

RESTRICTED OPENINGS

Restricted openings on the tops of recycling containers help the user quickly distinguish which container is appropriate for their material. Examples are small round openings for aluminum cans and plastic beverage containers and slits for office paper.

MESSAGING

Keep messaging consistent across all recycling bins, emails, fliers, and other materials. Relying solely on recycling information without compatible recycling and trash containers does not improve recycling behavior.



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Nebraska Recycling Council can help your municipality, business, or institution with the design and selection of recycling bins, signage, placement, and messaging. Contact us at 402-436-2384 for assistance.

For more Best Practices Fact Sheets visit: www.nrcne.org