WASHINGTON RECYCLING CONTAMINATION SURVEY

Presenters: Corinne McCarthy, Market Intelligence Director + Amanda Godwin, Project Manager
Contamination research scope

UNACCEPTED

DIRTY & WET

BAGGED UP
Research approach

• Quantitative survey of 750 Washington State residents
• Mix of age, income, employment, family status, education
• Included 100 Spanish speakers
WHY IS CONTAMINATION HAPPENING?
## Contamination behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Put item that they aren’t sure is accepted by recycle program in recycle bin</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put item with food or beverage residue in the recycle bin</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put recyclables in a plastic bag prior to putting them in the curbside bin</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Roots of contamination problem

**Good Intentions**
“Recycling more makes me a better person”

**Incorrect Assumptions**
“I assume the recycling process will sort out non-recyclables and clean the dirty ones”

**Growing Doubt**
“It doesn’t matter because it may not get recycled anyway”

**Confusion**
“Don’t the chasing arrows mean it’s recyclable?”
MAPPING THE RECYCLING DECISION MAKING PROCESS
When faced with an item that they are unsure is accepted, residents...

- 30% Use a website, recycling guide or cart sticker
- 17% Just put it in the trash
- 18% Just put it in recycle bin
- 18% Base on chasing arrows symbol
- 18% Base decision on type of material
- 9% Base decision on type of container

Residents:
- 7% Use a website, recycling guide or cart sticker
- 17% Just put it in the trash
- 18% Just put it in recycle bin
- 18% Base on chasing arrows symbol
- 18% Base decision on type of material
- 9% Base decision on type of container
If still unsure, 27% total put it in recycling bin

Faced with an item I’m not sure is accepted in my local recycling program, I:

- Put it in recycle bin: 7%
- Put it in the trash: 18%
- Check a reliable resource: 30%
- Look for symbol on item or assess based on material or container type: 45%

If I’m still not sure it’s accepted, I:

- Put it in the trash: 44%
- Put it in recycle bin: 27%
- Put it aside until I can figure it out: 29%
Positive association that “more recycling is better” is driving up contamination

37%  
I want to make sure I'm recycling everything I possibly can

28%  
I would feel bad if I put something that’s recyclable into the trash

18%  
I assume the recycling facility has a process to sort out non-recyclables
FOOD, BEVERAGE & WATER RESIDUE
People believe food residue does not cause problems or will be cleaned in recycling process

- **22%**
  I want to make sure I'm recycling everything I possibly can

- **18%**
  I assume that the recycling process will eliminate residue if necessary

- **17%**
  I would feel bad if I put something recyclable in the trash bin

- **13%**
  I assume it won't have impact on the quality of the recycling

- **11%**
  I haven't really thought about the impact of residue on recycling
Water is seen as natural, clean and pure, so can’t be a problem for recycling process

33%
I assume that since water is natural, clean & pure, it can't harm the recycling process

24%
I assume it won't have an impact on the quality of the recycling

22%
I assume that it would get emptied in the recycling process if necessary

21%
I haven't really thought about the impact of water on recycling
Time and effort are biggest barriers to cleaning recyclables

- 19% I have so many things competing for my time and attention, that cleaning/emptying recyclable containers won't always be a priority
- 19% It would be too messy or difficult to clean/empty some kinds of recyclable containers
- 19% It's just too inconvenient to clean/empty every recyclable container
- 18% I just won't always remember to clean/empty things before they go in the recycle bin
- 17% If I clean/empty recyclable containers I'll use more water than I want to
- 16% Other people in my house probably won't clean/empty them, and the ones I make an effort to clean/empty would get contaminated anyway
- 13% I'm not always sure what's recyclable, so I might waste time and effort cleaning/emptying containers that don't get recycled anyway
- 11% Other households probably won't clean/empty their recyclables, and the ones I make an effort to clean/empty might get contaminated anyway
RECYCLABLE ITEMS IN PLASTIC BAGS
Plastic bags are recyclable, so it makes sense

Controls bad odor

Easier to carry to outside recycle bin

Keeps my kitchen bin clean

Helps waste management facility separate recyclables

Helps me separate recycling from trash
Challenges to not bagging recyclables

- **22%** Making sure everyone in my household knows not to put recyclables in plastic bags
- **21%** I'll have to find different way to move the recyclable products from the household bin to the curbside bin
- **20%** Remembering to do it differently
- **19%** I still want to line my recycle bin with plastic to keep it clean
- **19%** I'd have to find a different way to control the odor
INFORMED AND WISHFUL RECYCLERS
30% Informed Recyclers
- Makes decisions based on reliable resources

45% Wishful Recyclers
- Makes decisions based on unreliable judgments
Differences in demographics and recycling habits

**Informed Recyclers**
- 55+ y/o
- Female
- White
- Retired

30% Make decisions about what goes in recycle bin based on website, guide or cart label.

**Wishful Recyclers**
- Spanish-speaking respondents
- 1 child
- 25 - 34 y/o

45% Make decisions about what goes in recycle bin based on material type, container type or chasing arrows.
Informed Recyclers Want…

I wish our local, state & federal governments would all take plastic pollution & clean energy & climate change more seriously & enact laws to help fight these insidious issues.

Better instructions on what is recyclable in my area, and even more importantly greater consistency from area to area.

EASIER REQUIREMENTS:
PAPER HAS TO GO IN SEPARATE BIN FROM CANS/GLASS/PLASTIC TO ELIMINATE CONTAMINATION.

It would be great if [recycling] centers came out with a list like plastic # x, y, and z can be recycled, but not #a and b. It would make the whole process easier!

Clearer differentiation between recyclability of common products.

Good communication from recycling company - dos and don’ts
Wishful Recyclers Want...

- PROOF THAT WHAT I RECYCLE IS ACTUALLY BEING RECYCLED.
- ...info or tutorials of how to do it best.
- Maybe a guesstimate on how much impact my recycling has helped on a yearly basis from our waste disposal company
- Knowing that the effort was not wasted by the items going to landfills
- If it were easier to recycle or less strict, such as them just cleaning the mold...
- If it were easier to recycle or less strict, such as them just cleaning the mold...
- If I knew I was making a difference
- It would inspire me if I knew that all recycled material actually got recycled
Insight into action

- Capitalize on fact that people want to recycle right
- Provide a “why” that consumers can relate to
- Focus more on Wishful Recyclers since they contribute more to the problem; but help “informed recyclers” recognize they are part of the problem too
- Give people simple information about how to recycle right; focus on one behavior at a time
- Be willing to tell people “it’s okay to put it in the trash”
- Demonstrate that recycling right really makes a difference to alleviate doubt
Questions?
THANK YOU!