

# PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Ten Tips For Designing  
Public Space Recycling Programs



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and workplace for many people, but it is only

## Recycling Must Be Simple And Convenient

It's a beautiful day and a man is at the central town park with his family and hundreds of others enjoying the Fourth of July festivities. They've finished their picnic and the kids are bolting for the sauce from the face of the youngest child. The man, we'll call him Steve, is setting out from the picnic table with a stack of used paper plates in one hand and a few empty cans precariously held in the other. We don't know if the kids will keep up their good behavior or if the youngest will stay awake for the fireworks. But we can say with some certainty that Steve will use the nearest set of waste receptacles he sees and that he's going to dedicate no more than one second to do so. He drops the plates and cans into. Whether the items are recycled or not is a matter of chance, not on whether Steve is a "recycler."

Getting Steve to recycle correctly comes down to two overriding factors: convenience and an immediately clear understanding of what is supposed to go into which bin. Studies about environmental attitudes show that roughly 15% of Americans are motivated to recycle by an intrinsic appreciation of the resulting environmental benefits. For the other 85% of people, recycling is a vaguely "good thing" they're more or less inclined to do if they are presented a choice. Ultimately, the waste item in someone's hand, almost by definition, holds no value to them and therefore is not the main focus of their attention. Someone in Steve's position is already thinking ahead to joining

the kids on the playground or finding a sink to wash his hands. Even in the limited one or two seconds that he considers a waste bin his focus is split, not unlike someone texting while he or she walks.

At each stage of designing a public space recycling program it's important to keep this in mind. It is not realistic to assume people will adapt to the waste infrastructure provided, whether walking past trash bins to find recycling or taking time to read detailed signage. Instead, the design and placement of bins



## Know your WASTE STREAM

While many recycling best practices are universal from one setting to another, each location has unique conditions that can impact a program's success. The types of material in the waste stream, where it is coming from and where it is going to should all be considered up front in the planning process before bin styles or messaging are decided.

## What is in the trash?

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Special events and certain closed-system locations such as a food court provide an opportunity to influence what gets discarded before the public even arrives. For example, if #3 through #7 plastics are used, food service managers to switch these for acceptable alternatives. If you're looking to capture food waste, that can be accepted in the same bin as the food organics without the need for sorting.

**%** here are the recyclables going?

Which type of recycling facility are the collected items going to? If they are processed in automated material recycling facility (MRF) that can efficiently process all materials presents a simpler recycling option to users and reduces the need for multiple bins labeled for individual materials. Regardless, it is worth



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coordinator, but "Mixed Recycling" is likely to be more recognizable to a layperson. Don't go too simplistic, either. Just listing "Recycle" or placing the recycling triangle by itself without indicating a material type is also critically important to make sure people can tell them apart with a casual glance. You can strike that balance by using color, additional signage or other modifications to distinguish them.

### Pictures are best

An image of a can or piece of paper instantly conveys what's accepted to native and non-language speakers alike. This is especially important in areas with multilingual populations or tourist locations frequented by foreign visitors. Simplicity applies here as well, though two or three images work better than a crowded sign with too many.

### + Avoid listing the "don'ts"

Listing out prohibited materials risks too much information and might cause people to tune out. The exception to this is where you have high volumes of a persistent contaminant such as coffee cups. Even in this situation, consider an image with a strike-through as opposed to additional words like "No Coffee Cups" that can compete with "Cans & Bottles" for the user's attention.

### Put the label where it will be seen

Don't put messages on the side of a bin if the opening is on the top. Place your message at eye level or immediately next to the opening. Make sure people will see labels or signage as they approach from multiple directions.

### Choose the Right Bin

There are compelling aesthetic reasons to have different colors for different types of bins. It is also critically important to make sure people can tell them apart with a casual glance. You can strike that balance by using color, additional signage or other modifications to distinguish them.

### \* Use a different color

Whether it is the entire bin or just the lid, make sure the recycling bin is a different color than the trash bin.





plastic bottles have been shown to reinforce the recycling association and reduce contamination.

## Be consistent

Pick a uniform bin style, color scheme and label message and stick to it. In the same way a person comes to recognize and associate particular qualities and characteristics with a consumer product brand, applying a standard look for recycling bins helps to "brand" them in people's minds. As they walk across a park or other facility, seeing the same blue color and distinctive shape to a bin reduces the need to learn from scratch what a particular waste receptacle is supposed to collect.

\* Use standard messaging

Once you've found an effective sign or label message, use it consistently. Avoid labels that refer to "Plastic Bottles #1 - #7" on one bin but then say "Plastics" on another 20 feet away. This leads to confusion. Confusion leads to items going in the wrong bin.

## Standard bins and color scheme.

Different bins may be warranted at a particular location for aesthetic or operational reasons, but an effort should be made to limit these to as few uniform styles as possible. Even where multiple styles are necessary, make an effort to apply a uniform color or even a particular color tint to extend as much of a common look as possible.

• Coordinate across settings and jurisdictions  
Standardizing a recycling program to match the local facility is one of the most important initiatives to improve public recycling programs. Where possible, coordinate with the residential curbside program or other local jurisdictions to standardize what can be done. Use consistent colors, shapes, and messages. Coordinate with the residential curbside program or other local jurisdictions to standardize what can be done. Use consistent colors, shapes, and messages.

## 1# Keep Bin Clean And Well Maintained Use of labels, color schemes, special lids and

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## educAtionAl outReAch

Recycling programs and other activities that require people to change long ingrained habits will benefit from educational outreach to communicate both the "how" of what they're being asked to do, and the "why." With workplace or residential recycling programs you typically know who your audience is and how to reach them. More importantly, these settings allow people to develop a rhythm around the specifics of what and how to recycle over time. Public space locations face unique challenges that make education more difficult. An individual's feeling relationship to a location like a shopping mall food court or unfamiliar street corner combined with the lack of standard messaging, color coding system or list of what is accepted from one

Take advantage of the bin

Aside from the label that goes next to the opening,

in the newsletter they send to area businesses. Take pride in the program and look for creative ways to #2AA@+"#%:&(:\$"9(2+(%+(2+52"+5(3%9"9(:2@9&-(5-2@J9( and other stakeholders.

over time, but also be patient and allow immediate prk p

**3** Be PRePARed And Be ReAdy to IMPROve  
This guide offers general guidelines that apply to most situations, but ultimately what works in one place can miss the mark in another. Even following all the tips in this guide does not mean 02@(#%+(J@:(2@:(3"+9(%+, (%99@A&(&7&-0:\$"+5(1""(52( smoothly.

### Start with a pilot

Before rolling out a large recycling program and potentially investing tens of thousands of dollars or more in bins and equipment, run a pilot program in a few test areas for six months or so. See if a blue lid is enough to distinguish the recycling bins or if the entire bin really needs to be a different color to work. Find out what wording on the bin labels best works to keep out the unwanted items. Can you get by with larger 45-gallon bins to reduce collection frequency, or do you find odor issues require frequent collection anyway when the bins are only half full? Knowing what actually works and making the upfront modifications can save a tremendous amount of headache once the full program is implemented.

### 4valuate and Adjust

It is difficult if not impossible to anticipate all the issues that might come up. During the first year after a program is implemented pay close attention to how it is working. Which locations consistently end up with more cans and bottles in the trash? Can switching the position of the trash and recycling or moving them closer to an entranceway improve the situation? Note seasonal trends such as the need for additional bins at certain locations during especially busy times of the year. Be prepared to monitor and make adjustments