



10 Tips

for Designing Successful Public Space Recycling Programs

Establishing effective public space recycling requires more than simply setting out a few recycling bins. Getting people to use the bins, and do so correctly requires careful thought with everything from selecting the right bin style for the location, to the message on the bin and even where the bins are placed. While people become familiar with what to recycle and which bin to put items into at their home or workplace, public space settings such as parks, food courts, airports, street corners or building lobbies have unique challenges that can lead people to toss trash into the recycling bin or simply not recycle at all. The practices covered in this tip sheet* have been shown to be effective in increasing public participation and reducing contamination in recycling bins.

1

RECYCLING MUST BE CONVENIENT

When designing your recycling program, anticipate human behavior. The average person will choose to recycle if it is easy and simple to do. However, keep in mind their first priority is to get rid of a waste item they no longer want.

- Easy to access recycling bins. Only the most dedicated recyclers are going to carry around an empty can looking for a recycling bin. Recycling bins must be close at hand.
- Keep it simple and clear. Most people will only spend half a second to understand which bin to place their waste item in. The design and messaging on the recycling bin must communicate what is accepted in that bin without requiring active concentration from users.

2

PLACE RECYCLING BINS DIRECTLY NEXT TO THE TRASH BINS

Trash and recycling bins are first and foremost “waste bins” in people’s minds. If there is only one bin in front of them, they are likely to use it regardless of whether it is labeled “Trash” or “Recycling”.

- A recycling bin by itself will collect trash. Even with trash and recycling separated by only a couple feet, many people will use the first one they come to regardless of how it is labeled.
- Pair recycling and trash bins together in all locations. Don’t expect people to walk to centralized recycling bins located across a plaza when there is a convenient trash bin nearby. Consider reducing the number of trash bins instead. While fewer trash receptacles can lead to more litter in some situations this is not automatically the case.

3

USE RESTRICTIVE LIDS

- Small openings reduce contamination. Restrictive lids that are only large enough to accept common recyclables (circular for cans and bottles, narrow slot for paper) send a visual cue as well as force people to slow down long enough to read what the label says.
- Trash should have wide open lids. If someone is too distracted to read the label on the bin, it's usually preferable to have them toss items in the trash.



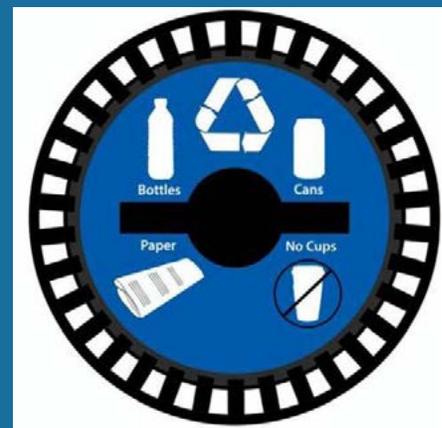
Poorly designed programs invite contamination. This bin is far from the trash bin and does not have a restrictive lid.

4

USE CLEAR, SIMPLE LABELS AND SIGNAGE

With only a fleeting moment of attention, it is important to convey what should go in a bin in the simplest terms.

- Use a few key words. “Cans & Bottles”, “Paper”, “Plastic Bottles”, etc. There is a balancing act between informing people and avoiding too much information that causes them to tune out. Listing out each material fully (“Aluminum Cans, Glass Bottles, Plastic Bottles #1-7”) can lead some people not to read the signage at all.
- Pictures are good. An image of a can or piece of paper instantly conveys what's accepted to native and non-language speakers alike.
- Avoid listing the “don'ts”. It is always better to communicate what is recycled so unless you're getting a lot of a specific type of contamination, it's best to avoid listing what you don't want. Only do this for the persistent items that are a real problem.
- Put the label where it will be seen. Don't put the label on the side of a bin if the opening is on the top. Place the list at eye level and immediately next to the opening. Make sure people will see labels or signage as they approach from multiple directions.



Example of clear, simple labeling.

5

BE DELIBERATE WITH THE BIN STYLE YOU CHOOSE

There are compelling aesthetic reasons to have recycling bins match the trash bins that they are paired with, but it is also important to make sure people can tell them apart. You can strike that balance by choosing bins with common architectural features while 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 to use a different color from the trash bin. There is no uniform standard in the United States to identify a recycling bin, but blue is the most commonly used.
- Use a special lid or sign boards with messaging to distinguish the recycling bin.
- Clear bins can reduce contamination. Seeing cans and bottles already inside the bin communicates that it is meant for recyclables to the approaching users. Clear bins are especially effective for special event settings.

6

BE CONSISTENT

Pick a uniform bin style, color scheme and label message and stick to it. People will get used to the standard and recognize it in different locations, reducing the potential for confusion as they walk across a park or other facility.

7

KNOW YOUR WASTE STREAM, WHERE IT'S COMING FROM AND WHERE IT'S GOING

It is useful to know what materials are in the waste stream and where they are being generated. This will influence both the message that goes on the label and where you place recycling bins.

- Waste audits. A formal waste characterization study can provide detailed and valuable information, but can cost a lot of money which may be better spent purchasing additional recycling bins. Even a basic visual survey of trash bins can give you general sense of common recyclables to target and which areas may need more recycling bins.
- Where is material being discarded? Just because people buy their beverage from a vending machine doesn't mean they will toss the empty container in the same spot. Observe actual traffic patterns to select the best places to locate bins.
- Where are recyclables going? Some recycling facilities have greater tolerance for contamination than others. Talk with the end-recycler to know what they can accept.

8

KEEP IT CLEAN AND ORDERLY

Dirty and dilapidated recycling bins can turn people off. The same is true for overflowing or badly contaminated recycling bins. Keeping bins in good working order with fresh labels and regular cleaning will make people more inclined to use them correctly.

9

PILOT, EVALUATE AND IMPROVE

This guide offers a number of common practices that have worked elsewhere, but every location is unique. What works well in some settings can miss the mark in others.

- Pilot your program. Set out a few bins in a test location and see what works before making a large investment in bins. Test to see what messaging works best for a given situation. Wait a few months and then make changes as necessary when expanding.
- Monitor and adjust as needed. What seems obvious like bin placement at the start may prove to be wrong down the road. Be ready to move that bin when you notice there's too much contamination or simply not enough traffic to warrant a given location.
- Benchmark and track progress. Measure how much is collected in the recycling bins so you can identify trends over time. A successful program can help justify future expansions and measuring quantities collected helps build the case. Even if it is not possible to weigh recyclables you can count full bags and use this to estimate weights.

10

EDUCATION

Education is important both for motivating people to recycle and knowing how to do it in any location. Public space settings present special challenges, but there may be creative options.

- Signage. Fixing signs to the backside of a recycling bin or near facility entrances can provide more opportunities to message beyond the label on the bin (e.g. bulletin board at a park). The same rule applies, however. Keep it simple and easy to understand.
- Face to Face interaction. Personal interaction is the most effective way to educate people. However, this can take a lot of effort to reach a smaller audience. Where it is most effective is in locations with reoccurring users such as a campus food court or community center that serves the same population over time.



* This tip sheet is excerpted from a comprehensive guide prepared by KAB. Download the full guide and view a webinar recording of an expert panel of discussing best practices in our online [Public Space Recycling Resources](#).