

MEASURED RESULTS CASE STUDY



Empathetic Messaging Drives 38% Increase in Recyclables Captured

Reynoldsburg, Ohio



Participation is one of the five essential requirements of an effective residential recycling system. Even when people have access to recycling, the system doesn't deliver if they don't use it or don't use it correctly. The Recycling Partnership has spent more than a decade testing how education and outreach affect real behavior, partnering with communities to develop and refine best practices that increase participation, capture more material, and reduce contamination.

The 2022 project in Reynoldsburg, Ohio took that work to the next level. The city already had universal recycling access and high cart set-out rates. The challenge wasn't getting residents to recycle; it was getting them to recycle more.

What We Tested

With support from the Solid Waste Authority of Central Ohio and Local Waste Services, The Partnership tested whether changes in messaging could drive that next-level impact. We collaborated with designers and behavioral scientists to create 20 visual designs across 10 message concepts, then narrowed to three approaches based on interviews with infrequent recyclers: empathetic, emotional, and logical.

From there, The Partnership replicated a campaign proven effective in changing recycling behavior and reducing contamination to further test its replicability - four rounds of carts tags and a mailer. The control group received no message.

Results Were Clear

"There's a say/do gap, and that's the importance of this work," said Michelle Metzler, executive director at The Partnership and lead on the Reynoldsburg project. "There were multiple messaging types that people said would motivate them but that's not what we saw in the field." After three months, The Partnership found:

- **Empathetic messaging boosted recycling tonnage by 38%, with seven additional tons collected per month**
- Emotional messaging led to a smaller bump: two extra tons collected per month
- Logical messaging and control group saw no change



Empathetic: Showing empathy for recycling confusion.



Emotional: Reminding people to think about the future of their waste.



Logical: Showing recycled materials being made into new things.

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The results showed that in high-access environments, message design can make the difference between status quo and real gains. The most effective approach didn't instruct; it related to residents being seen and understood.

But What About Sustained Behavior?

In 2024, The Partnership was able to revisit with a second analysis using a full year of data, an additional nine months from the previous results.

While initially very impactful, the 38% increase in recycling tonnage began to decrease over time. In the year following the intervention, recycling tons were **still 18% higher** than prior to the intervention. This showcases sustained impact for one year and resulted in **32 additional tons of recyclables** through the year. Especially when compared to the emotional and logical messaging, which saw a 7% impact and no impact, respectively.

Empathetic Messaging for the Win.

We tested it. Through 10 messaging concepts, what works is empathetic messaging. Read the full Reynoldsburg report [here](#).

PARTNER WITH US. LET'S BUILD A BETTER RECYCLING SYSTEM, TOGETHER.

