

Center for Sustainable Behavior & Impact

Consumer Insights on Packaging, Labels, and Claims for Recycling

Why This Matters

When we dive deep into how and why people decide what can go in their recycling bin, we find they are making lots of inaccurate judgement calls based on assumptions, wishes, what they learned about recycling in the past, and what they believe a label on a product or package is telling them to do.

This is certainly not surprising. The Recycling Partnership tracks data on changes to recycling programs using the National Recycling Database, a centralized, state-of-the-art resource that monitors recycling access in 9,000 communities for 97% of the U.S. population. From this real-time data, we know *recycling programs are dynamic*. Service offerings and accepted materials shift over time based on market conditions, changes in material recovery facility (MRF) capabilities, and the terms of waste contracts.

In addition to local program guidelines, people rely on product labels or packaging for clues to recyclability. **Over the years our research and that of others has consistently found that the chasing arrows symbol is a trusted recycling information source for consumers. In reality, it often offers misdirection and leads people to recycle items that cannot be recycled in their community.**

All of these factors make it challenging for people to keep up with recycling right. It also makes it challenging for brands to communicate the recyclability of their product packaging.

Our goal with this research, conducted in partnership with OpinionWorks, was to learn how people are deciding what to recycle at home, where and why confusion exists, and how product labels play a role in that decision making process.

The results show that in addition to infrequent recycling program communications (such as printed guides and reference pieces, on-bin decals, or online resources), most people decide what can be recycled based on:



What the packaging label shows, particularly whether they see the chasing arrows symbol.



What they believe the item is made of. Is it something commonly recyclable like plastic, glass, metal, or paper?

With the findings noted below, we have the insights we need to improve messaging and outreach to recyclers and push for upstream solutions—including policies—that ease consumer frustration.

Research Methodology

Our research was conducted in two phases with adults 18 years or older who said they recycle at home or have access to recycling even if they don't currently recycle. In Phase 1, a general baseline survey was conducted both online and via telephone with a nationally representative sample of 1,310 participants. People were shown real-world products and packaging labels to see how they interpreted them and if they could accurately determine if an item was recyclable in their household bin. Follow-up, in-depth interviews were then completed with a cross-section of the 15 baseline survey participants.

In Phase 2, a user experience survey was conducted online with a national sample of 1,237 participants to test the appeal and viability of QR codes on product packaging which people could scan to identify whether the product or package in their hand could be recycled in their community. This was also followed by in-depth interviews with 15 survey participants.

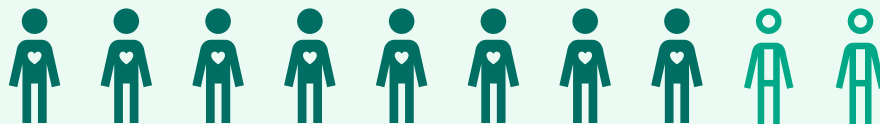
Key Findings

Finding 1

People value recycling and think they understand it, but many are confused about what can be recycled.

At the heart of it, people living in the U.S. continue to value recycling – eight out of 10 believe it has a positive impact and see it as a public service. And there's a nearly unanimous belief that it is "easy to recycle." And yet, even in households that are recycling, about half of recyclables make it into trash and not recycling, and one in four items collected for recycling are contamination and can't be recycled.

Why the disconnect between people's values and actions? One reason is simply confusion. While most people say they are confident they know what should and shouldn't be recycled, when tested with real world examples, most people (60%) confidently failed.



8 out of 10 people living in the U.S. believe recycling has a positive impact and see it as a valuable public service.

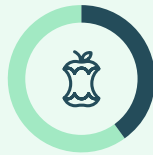
While most (81%) say they have the instructions they need to recycle, they are using other unreliable means to make recycling decisions.

Most people (eight out of 10) said they already know what they need to know about recycling, yet many are not doing it correctly. An exception to this was younger, blue collar, and people of color who felt like they do not have all the information they need to recycle right.



Wish Cycling

Nearly one-third of people admitted to “wish cycling” or putting items in their recycling bin in case there is a change they might get recycled.



Food Recycling

40% of people believe food can go in recycling bins.



Plastic Bags

50% believe plastic bags can go in recycling bins, even though very few programs accept them and they create hazardous situations for material recovery facility sorting machinery.

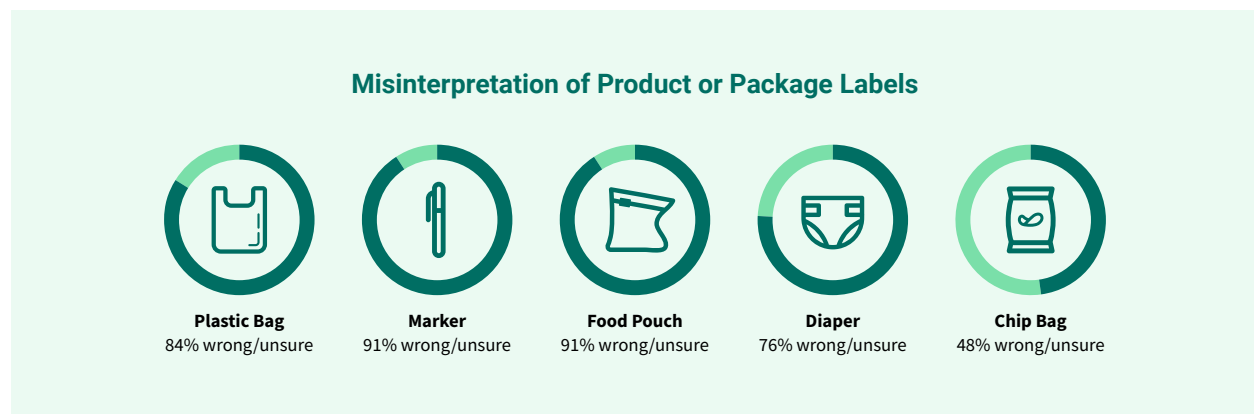
When deciding what to recycle, people are also making unreliable judgement calls based on what a material seems like it is made of and by interpreting product and packaging labels — “It’s plastic, it’s recyclable.”

And lastly, people have a misconception that what is recyclable doesn’t change. They are recycling incorrectly in some cases because they are basing decisions on past guidelines and recycling knowledge such as believing cartons are wax coated and should not be recycled, or envelopes with windows should not be recycled. They think they know what they need to know about recycling because that’s what they’ve *always* known.

Many people are relying on unclear product and packaging labels to help them decide what to recycle, leading to mistakes.

Most people (78%) look at packaging labels to know whether a product is recyclable and more than 82% trust that the recycling information on those labels is accurate.

However, when tested with actual items, many misinterpreted the product or package label and answered incorrectly when asked if the items could be recycled at home based on current average household recycling rules:



Those who answered questions incorrectly about item recyclability were also the most trusting of information they saw on product labels.

When it comes to people’s expectations around claims of recyclability, they believe materials cannot be called “recyclable” unless they are collected, separated, and actually recycled. **And 82% feel deceived when recyclability is implied but not actually true.**

Recyclable to them means first that the item will be remade into something new (though not necessarily the same exact item like a bottle or can), and also that the item is easy and convenient to recycle at home.

Question

What do you think the rules should be for whether or not “recyclable” or the chasing arrows can go on packaging. What must be true?

Answer

Number 1: “It is going to be repurposed or made into something else.”

Number 2: “It’s allowed to be in my recycle bin.”

Number 3: “My personal third one is that it’s convenient and don’t over complicate it. It’s trash or recycle. That’s it.”

The primary sources of packaging label confusion and opportunities for clarity and improvement are the chasing arrows symbol, “check locally”, and “return to store”.

When people are not sure whether an item is recyclable, most said they look on the package or label to see if it’s recyclable—and most are looking for the chasing arrows symbol. In the research, people interpreted any arrows on a product or package to mean it is recyclable, even though resin codes are not an indicator of recyclability, and recycling arrows show up on packaging for a number of reasons.

Product labels that instruct consumers to “check locally” regarding recyclability or “return to store” were also a source of confusion. Almost half of those surveyed said they are unsure or don’t know where to go when they see “check locally” on a product. For them, the label implies that there is an easy source to check, however, in many communities there is not. Note: the “check locally” label is currently being improved (since this survey was completed).

When people saw the “return to store” instruction (which is coupled with the instruction “empty, clean, dry”), many assumed recycling the item at home would yield the same results as dropping it off at a store if the item was empty, clean, and dry.



Could QR Codes be the Solution?

People need more than just information to make the right recycling decisions, they also need tools to make those decisions easier. Through a quantitative survey and in-depth interviews, The Recycling Partnership explored the idea of using QR codes to help. When shown a mock-up of a QR code on the side of a yogurt container, more than three-quarters of people surveyed said they would scan it to find out if the product package was recyclable in their community. Similarly, three-quarters thought it would be a “convenient” way to find recycling information.

“... I do love that idea [QR code], because that is a very convenient way to find out if I can recycle it versus...going on a municipality website or something to search for an item.”

—Tara

“I like that idea. If it’s very easy for you to find out in your area where you are, if it’s recyclable or not, that would save a lot of headache.”

—Heather

“You don’t have to pick up the phone and call anybody. You don’t have to go and look it up in a pamphlet. I think that’s brilliant. It’s very convenient...I would definitely use it.”

—Mireille

Conclusions & Opportunities

Consumers don't know who decides what is and isn't recyclable and what packages can say about recyclability, yet they are basing recycling decisions off what they believe product labels are telling them to do. This research demonstrates that in order to reduce people's frustration and confusion when deciding what can be recycled, we need both an upstream, system-based solution coupled with strong downstream education efforts.



The upstream solution must focus on making on-pack instructions and labeling for recyclability clear, consistent, and accurate across product types and across the country.

It's time to modernize and simplify how product packages provide local recycling information no matter where someone lives.

State-level policy is starting to tackle this issue by requiring more transparent packaging information and recyclability claims, including tightening requirements for use of the chasing arrow symbol. Consumer insights, like those in this report, highlight potential solutions, such as a dynamic QR code, and can continue to help shape new policy and help define the specific roles and responsibilities for brands.

However, even with policy and brand solutions on the horizon, we also need to invest more heavily in communication infrastructure, making investment in communications on par with investments in collections infrastructure. **More than 70% of people surveyed wish there was an easier way to get information on what can and can't be recycled in their community.**

This means serving up frequent and ongoing community level education and resources across multiple channels that make it easier to understand recycling guidelines and how to interpret product labels. This is especially needed for problematic contaminants such as batteries, electronics, organic material, home goods, construction materials, and hazardous waste.

There is also a need to reset expectations with the public that recycling changes—from what is accepted in curbside carts to the variety of recycling options available in the community—and to frame that change as positive and communicated well. This includes reminding people they may need to reexamine what they think they already know about recycling and ensuring that they understand what happens to their material once it leaves their home.

The Recycling Partnership helps support proper recycling through ongoing development of tested and proven outreach, supporting efficient local collection and sortation processes, and innovating system solutions with tools through stakeholder alignment. We offer free [resources for programs](#) to use to build their campaigns and signage, all informed by consumer research and behavior change activations.