

GREENSBORO, NC

Updated Education Helps Reduce Residential Confusion and Contamination

Descriptive Plastic Terms and Images Improve "Closed Lid" Recycling Program



The Challenge

In 2014, the City of Greensboro, North Carolina, had a 20% contamination rate in its recycling stream. The city surveyed its residents to understand what residents knew about Greensboro's existing recycling program. They also sought to understand if confusion about what could and couldn't be recycled was driving this higher-than-desired rate.

The results indicated that the city's recycling messaging needed simplification. This was especially true with plastics. Greensboro's recycling flyer grouped items to be recycled into ten categories, including two for plastics: "All Plastics #1-7" and "Rigid Plastics." These categories were not descriptive and used numbers to identify recyclable plastic items, which confused their residents. The result was residents put plastics in the curbside bins that the city did not collect for recycling.

Solutions

Following the survey, the city launched a new recycling campaign "Recycle First. It Matters." Greensboro's marketing firm developed a new flyer that grouped recyclables into four simple categories with images and descriptive, straightforward plastics terms, similar to those in the **Plastic Recycling Terms and Tools** resource found at RecycleYourPlastics.org.

These new plastic terms and images clearly explained what could be recycled in Greensboro's curbside recycling program.

POPULATION 279,639 (2013)

KEY POINTS

Is the oldest "closed lid" single stream program on the East Coast.

Conducted resident survey to get to the cause of rising contamination rates. Survey results showed that most households were confused about what to put in the recycling bins, particularly plastics.

Changed from "Plastics 1-7" message to descriptive term groups and images.

Uses 311 mobile program to allow drivers to report contamination in carts.

"Recycling needs to be simple, clear, and engaging."

- Tori Carle, Recycling Education Specialist, City of Greensboro, NC

Greensboro also worked to identify contamination at the source: the curbside bins. Recycling truck drivers now use a mobile 311 system to report an address where they see major contamination. After three reports, the city sends the residence a letter and an inspector visits the residence to help with education.

Results

It has been three years since Greensboro successfully implemented its improved recycling outreach. The city has received many positive comments from residents indicating they appreciate the new clear messaging and images. Most importantly, this new messaging is helping to reduce the contamination rate in the city's recycling stream. After peaking around 20%, the city's contamination rate has dropped to approximately 17% and the city's recycling staff is confident that this trend will continue.

Evolution of Greensboro's Plastics Messages



BEFORE (ABOVE): Original message of "All Plastics 1-7" was confusing to residents and many didn't know exactly what to put in carts.



AFTER/NOW (ABOVE): New outreach materials group plastics by clear, descriptive terms and images.

"We want our information to be understandable and descriptive for anyone, not a jargon-laden manual. Bright colors and simple categories mean that you don't have to spend more than 10-15 seconds looking at our guide to decide if most items are recyclable or not." - Tori Carle, Recycling Education Specialist

To find the descriptive terms that best describe your plastic recycling program, use the Plastic Recycling Terms and Tools resource. You can also download free images to further improve your outreach materials.

