



GreenNY

**New York State Energy Research and
Development Authority (NYSERDA)**

Case Study on Effectively Transforming Your Waste and Recycling Program

Summary

NYSERDA periodically reviews its waste and recycling program to improve information and signage effectiveness, based on staff input, to increase the recycling rate and decrease cross contamination. In the past, there has been confusion among staff incorrectly assuming that recycling programs are the same at the various buildings at NYSERDA as they are in people's residences. Additionally, inconsistent purchasing of bins in various sizes and colors, unclear signage or lack of signage, as well as janitorial staff moving bins away from the posted instructional signs created further confusion.

To maximize staff participation in the recycling program, NYSERDA's behavioral specialists offered their expertise to help influence clarity and inspire positive change. Suggestions included replacing bins with consistent color scheme and size as well as effectively communicating changes to both staff and vendors (i.e. janitors) staff, which resulted in significant improvement.

What were NYSERDA's lessons learned?

- Each recycling provider has a different policy for what can and can't be recycled; therefore, buildings with different recycling providers may require different programs.
- Recycling at home is not always the same at work due to differences in provider practices.
- Purchasing and deploying bins and signs is not enough; all bins are not created equal and should be carefully considered for their functionality
- Signage is most effective when written in a manner proven to positively impact behavioral change.
- Janitorial staff must know the policy and be part of the solution.
- Using various means of communicating with staff about the program is key.

Although certain practices may seem evident to some, not everyone will have the same knowledge base or interest in researching answers when they are unsure of the policy. Incorporating best practices can often have a resounding impact on the recycling rate. To further help protect the planet for future generations, the following guideline provide information to execute a successful recycling program.

Understand the recycling guidelines, based on the specific recycling provider:

Be aware of exactly which materials the contracted recycling provider can recycle. Remember that different buildings/sites may have different recycling providers resulting in different recycling policies. For example, one provider may accept 1-6 plastics while another accepts 1-7 plastics. One hauler may accept bottle caps while another may not. It is critical that recycling policies are in line with the provider's requirements and that staff are alerted to the differences between buildings or leased and owned spaces.

Make the Best Purchase

- When deciding which bins to purchase, consider the space and amount of recycling that is generated (e.g., a large bin is not necessary if there is only a small amount of recycling daily or if the room is small). For deposit containers, it is best to have a bin top with an opening only big enough for can or bottle to prevent mixing in the wrong materials.
- In order to improve clarity and efficiency for staff, receptacle colors and sizes should be consistent. This is helpful to staff who may travel between offices. For example, if possible, all offices should have one color designated for commingled recycling, another for deposit containers, and another for waste—not one office with blue commingled recycling and other offices with blue trash bins.



Create Effective Signage

- Make signage consistent at all offices, unless recycling practices differ at various sites.
- Eliminate any confusion by including images instead of text about what goes into which bins (e.g., an image of a Red Bull can be placed on the commingled recycling sign because staff often will mistakenly place it in the deposit containers bin).
- Be sure the sign is aesthetically appealing and will catch staff's attention. Using plain, black text on a white background, for example, is proven to be ineffective.
- Use a colored border on signs that match the associated bin's color. This will allow staff to quickly determine where garbage and recyclables should be placed, especially when they are already aware of the recycling policy.
- Avoid negative messaging in signs and communication related to recycling. Behavioral specialists recommend focusing only on desired outcomes. Signs displaying which items can be recycled rather than things that cannot is more effective.
- Avoid potentially confusing terms, such as "deposit here." Using terms that have multiple interpretations can be misleading since "deposit" could be understood as "insert here" or as "five-cent deposits go here." This is another area where an images are helpful.
- Encourage staff to rinse the recyclables and deposit containers to prevent pests, odors, and mess.
- Use the term "landfill" rather than garbage on your waste bin signs. This designation tends to be more negatively connotated and can encourage more recycling.
- Encourage staff feedback to help address confusion points and be open to revising signage to ensure messaging is clear and concise for comprehensive staff interpretation. Your interpretation can be very different from someone else's.
- Make sure sign is sized and placed properly to be seen easily.
- Look for samples of NYSERDA's recycling signs on the GreenNY website.



Other Considerations

- Bring janitorial staff into the loop on the recycling policies and make sure they understand the importance of their role in executing policies and procedures correctly. If the office is a lease or someone else hires the cleaning staff (e.g., building management subcontractor, consider requesting a meeting to discuss waste/recycling.) Cleaning staff should ensure that bins consistently remain in the same place and are properly spaced throughout the building. If the bins do not have signs on them, it is important that they are placed back under the appropriate sign. Most importantly, ensure that trash and recycling are not dumped together, which sometimes occurs.
- To reduce the number of plastic bags used to line bins, since they are an environmental issue, ask janitorial staff to ONLY line the trash bin. If recyclables are rinsed, plastic bags are not necessary.
- Commercial recycling can reduce the cost of disposal and waste disposal often costs more. If the recycling rate increases and waste volume decreases, attempt to negotiate smaller waste dumpsters to save money. NYSERDA currently uses the smallest sized dumpster.

Communicate with Staff (Beyond Signage)

- Use different formats to communicate the new protocol for continuous reinforcement. Consider sending emails, include information in a verbal presentation (e.g., staff meeting), include information in company newsletters, and have recycling 101 posters or Frequently Asked Questions in visible locations. Reminders are important since staff may intermittently miss the information. Also, statistics show people need to hear something seven times before they will take action, so relaying information regularly and in different formats is essential.
- It is important that all facets of the new recycling program are implemented simultaneously. All bins and signs should be rolled out on the same day and correspond with the announcement to staff. If one part is rolled out without the other (e.g., bins before signs), staff can easily be confused, frustrated, and reluctant to participate.
- Remember, contamination of bins with items that are not recyclable (e.g., food mixed in with plastics or plastics without the triangular symbol) can result in rejection of the entire batch by the recycling provider since it is not consistent with their respective protocols, often dictated by the buyers of the materials. This is critical to communicate to staff so they fully understand how easily the program can fail. NYSERDA has signs in place that say, "If in doubt, throw it out."