

Four Pillars of Recycling Motivation

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Introduction

What motivates a behavior change?

1. A practical way to change,
2. A reason to change, and
3. A belief that change is possible.



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What are the Four Pillars of Recycling Motivation?

1. Easy/Convenience
2. What's in it for Me?
3. Emotions/Guilt
4. Education/Engagement



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1. Easy/Convenience



- **Traveling distance** – Curbside service is more convenient than loading up materials and driving to a drop-off site.
- **Sorting recyclables** – Single-stream recycling is easier than having to keep materials separate.
- **Setting out materials for collection** – Wheeling out a cart is easier than lifting heavy tubs.
- **Simplifying recycling rules** – If recycling instructions are too confusing or demanding, individuals might just give up.



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1. Easy/Convenience



- **Making recycle bins easy to identify** – Recycle bin differentiation (color or type) from garbage containers and clear container labeling serve to:

- Enable people to quickly identify which container to place their recyclables in;
- Reduce contamination;
- Encourage greater recycling participation;
- Alleviate customer guesswork;
- Improve collection efficiency; and
- Create greater awareness by reinforcing the recycling messaging.



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2. What's in it for Me?



- **Direct financial benefit to me for recycling** – *Show me the money!*
 - Bottle deposit/refund systems exist in some states (limited to a few states and primarily for aluminum cans now). The beverage and bottling industries hate deposit bills and actively lobby against them.
 - Scrap metal collectors – paid by the pound.
 - Cardboard recycling only routes – paid.
- **Save money on my garbage bill** – Pay less for service by choosing a smaller container size.
 - This is generally a “one-off” event to a smaller sized garbage cart. A limited number of cart sizes are available, and it can be hard for larger families to downsize their garbage cart.

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2. What's in it for Me?



- **Reverse Vending Machines** – Have shown some effectiveness because they combine convenience with direct financial incentives.
- **Rewards & discount programs** – Programs, such as Recyclebank®, were pricey and didn't really track individual recycling efforts. Funding became difficult when recycling markets dropped.
- **Competitions & prizes** – Events where individuals, schools, or communities compete to collect or recycle the most materials (e.g., "RecycleMania").

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3. Emotions/Guilt



- **Environmental concerns** – Protect nature and wildlife, reduce pollution, conserve natural resources.
 - All good reasons to recycle, but little direct or immediate impact on the individual.
 - "It's the right thing to do" may be what people feel they should say on surveys when explaining why they recycle. However, in reality, it is not the strongest of motivating factors.

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3. Emotions/Guilt



- **Social norms** – Community expectations
 - All my neighbors recycle and I want to fit in.
- **Peer pressure** – Parents, spouses, friends, etc. urge a behavior change (negative/positive).
- **Feel good factor** – Personal satisfaction, helping the planet, or civic duty.
- **Religious values** – Moral responsibility to recycle.

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Penalties (consequences)

- None of the pillars so far have been penalties (fines, fees, or punishments), because **penalties are not the best tool for encouraging recycling.**
 - Penalties can trigger resistance and resentment.
 - If enforcement weakens, recycling participation declines.
 - Punishments can disproportionately affect some groups more than others (e.g., can hit lower-income households harder).
 - Penalties don't build long-term habits, teach why recycling matters, or show how to do it correctly.



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Penalties (consequences)

- Ordinances can be effective in **increasing the availability and opportunities for recycling**, which, in turn, can lead to higher recycling rates.
 - However, **ordinances by themselves do not serve as a motivating factor for increasing participation.**



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4. Education/Engagement



- **Starts with trust** – It takes time to build your identity as a reliable and trustworthy source. Providing accurate, not sensationalized, information.
- **Understanding the impact of recycling –**
 - **Good for our economy** (e.g., keeps material costs down and creates jobs).
 - **Good for our health** (e.g., reduces pollution and lowers toxicity).
 - **Good for our long-term survival** (lowers GHG emissions and uses less energy).

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4. Education/Engagement



- **Knowing what happens to the recycled materials** – When people know materials are actually recycled into new products (not landfilled or burned), it makes the impact feel real.
 - This can help avoid skeptical statements, such as “Why bother if it all ends up as trash anyway?”
 - Provides new information or insight

Bottle = Shirt

The plastic water bottles you recycle can be made into thread for fabric used to make clothing, backpacks, sneakers and more.



Paper = Paperboard

The clean paper you recycle is pulped and made into paperboard packaging for cereal, crackers and other household goods.



Jug = Carpet

The thick multi-gallon plastic water jugs you recycle can be made into carpet for homes and businesses.



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