

Companies are finding more money in recycling

October 9 2012, by Joe Taschler

Folks around the United States are increasingly finding money in their trash. It's not that someone is going around tossing greenbacks into the garbage. But companies and institutions across the region are finding that what they throw away is often more valuable than they realized.

As the price of nearly everything related to [crude oil](#) has soared and the sustainability movement has gained momentum, recycling markets for everything from shrink wrap to microwaveable plastic macaroni-and-cheese cups have strengthened across the globe.

The result is a double benefit for businesses: They are being paid for the material and they eliminate the cost of sending the [waste](#) to a landfill.

"Depending on the material and the markets for the material, there can be some significant savings that a company realizes," said Joe Van Rossum, recycling specialist for the University of Wisconsin Extension. "With competition being what it is and companies constantly on the lookout to push costs down, those are things that people are looking at."

There is also a sense that diverting materials from [landfills](#) is the right thing to do.

That's what happened at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin late last year.

A group of operating room nurses and doctors teamed up with the hospital's environmental services department and started sorting

polypropylene surgical sheeting, known as blue wrap, out of the trash.

"The nurses and doctors came to us and said, 'We think we can do this,'" said Chris Stoll, director of environmental services for the hospital.

They were right.

In August, the operating room diverted more than 5 tons of blue wrap material from the hospital's waste stream, Stoll said.

That represented nearly 6 percent of the hospital's total waste for the month. And the hospital is saving more than \$13,000 a year in disposal costs as a result, Stoll said.

The blue wrap is handled by Waste Management's A1 Recycling Services in Milwaukee. The [polypropylene](#) blue wrap is sent to Becker Plastics in Neenah, said Lynn Morgan, a spokeswoman for Waste Management's Wisconsin and Upper Peninsula region. Becker Plastics turns the material into pellets, then sends it to end users who make it into other products - including more blue wrap.

Columbia St. Mary's Hospital Ozaukee in Mequon, Wis., also has begun a plastics recycling program in its operating room, said Julie Prom, a surgical assistant at the hospital.

The staff at the hospital has embraced the program, she said.

Prom didn't have exact numbers on how much is being diverted from landfills, but said, "It's been much bigger than we thought."

Blue wrap is used as part of the sterility procedures in operating rooms, and what is being recycled never comes in contact with patients, Prom and Stoll said.

BUYERS FOR EVERYTHING

Business owners shouldn't assume that a particular item isn't recyclable, said Margaret Mucci, plant manager for the Waste Management/A1 Recycling facility on Milwaukee's south side.

"There's nothing that we won't try," she said.

Where recycling markets were once limited to aluminum cans, soda bottles and milk jugs, there are now recyclables markets for just about everything, Mucci said.

"We have a buyer for everything in here," she said during a recent tour of the plant. Materials in there on a recent day included under-sink plastic housings for [garbage](#) disposals; plastic point-of-purchase displays; shrink wrap; blue wrap; plastic macaroni-and-cheese containers; plastic pallets; retail computer kiosks; computers; televisions; plastic plant trays; and bottles and jugs of almost every shape and size.

Many of the products that come through the [Waste Management](#) plant are less-than-perfect rejects that are misshapen or have labels that are off center.

"We have people who do nothing but find homes for these things," Mucci said.

One customer has been able to save \$15,000 a month in disposal costs after realizing that it was throwing away recyclable material, Mucci said.

That realization was the result of what's known as a waste audit. That often occurs when Mucci and other staffers from the recycling plant climb onto - or into - a trash bin and dig through the refuse.

"We can take all this stuff," Mucci said she told a customer after looking through the waste.

The company also will stop a load at the landfill and go through the waste there.

Mucci said she almost always finds something of value.

"The waste stream no longer looks as it once did," she said.

DEMAND OUTSTRIPS SUPPLY

Markets have changed to the point that demand for certain recyclable plastics is outstripping supply, said Patty Moore, president and CEO of Moore Recycling Associates, a national recycling consulting firm based in Sonoma, Calif.

Perhaps the best example of how markets for recyclables have changed is plastic, Moore said.

"The problem right now is there is just not enough (recycled) feedstock to meet demand," she said. "We're in a position where there is far more demand than supply.

"I think people in general have this idea that there are all these piles of plastics sitting around waiting to be recycled, and that just couldn't be farther from the truth. There are not piles of plastic sitting around looking for homes."

For businesses, it's worth asking whether savings can be found in their disposal costs, Moore said.

"Almost always companies can save money if they look at their [waste](#)

[stream](#)," she said. "Very seldom will it not save them money.

"Very often, people just don't think about it," she added. "They say, 'Oh, that's just trash.' "

UW Extension's Van Rossum agrees.

"What I usually tell people is, if you can get truckload quantities of plastic that's a single polymer, you'll have no difficulty finding someone willing to pay you money for it," he said. "The challenge is to get it sorted, packaged and ready to go into the marketplace.

"Many companies are looking at that," he added. "They're sending me emails and calling - 'How can we do this better?'"

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