

Recycling entrepreneur stubs out cigarette garbage

January 27 2013, by Brigitte Dusseau



TerraCycle CEO Tom Szaky works in his office at the company's headquarters in Trenton, New Jersey, on January 10, 2013. TerraCycle Inc., a company devoted to creating recycling systems for hard-to-recycle waste, has created an alternative to leaving cigarette butts on roadways or putting them into landfills.

Recycling entrepreneur Tom Szaky is stubbing out the world's cigarette problem—one butt at a time.

The 30-year-old who dropped out of Princeton University to start his innovative company TerraCycle in Trenton, New Jersey, says there's no such thing as trash, even when you're talking about the contents of ashtrays.

In a program started in May in Canada and now running from the United States to Spain, TerraCycle collects [cigarette butts](#) from volunteers and turns them into plastic, which can be used for anything, even ashtrays themselves.

The discarded cigarettes, which litter countries around the world, are first broken up, with the paper and remaining tobacco composted.

The filter, made of a plastic called cellulose acetate, is melted down and turned into an ingredient for making a wide range of industrial plastic products, such as pallets—the trays used to ship heavy goods.

It seems that for once smoking benefits everyone.

The [tobacco industry](#), happy to get some decent publicity, pays TerraCycle.

Volunteer collectors win points per butt, which can then be redeemed as contributions to charities.

[Sidewalks](#) start looking cleaner. And TerraCycle, which sells recycled products to retailers like [Walmart](#) and Whole Foods, gets more business.

TerraCycle has a similarly creative view on all manner of other refuse that has tended to be bracketed as impossible to recycle and is instead sent to the [landfill](#).

Juice sachets, [plastic bottles](#), pens, coffee capsules, candy wrappers,

toothbrushes and computer keyboards are all grist for TerraCycle's mill.



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Some items go to classic recycling, meaning they are used purely as material for a wholly new product.

Others are upcycled, which means the shape of the piece of garbage is retained and incorporated into a new product. For example, candy wrappers, complete with their logos, are used to bind books, or are joined together to make backpacks.

"The purpose of TerraCycle is to make things that are non recyclable recyclable," CEO Szaky told AFP at the New Jersey headquarters. Soon

they'll be doing chewing gum and dirty diapers, but Szaky said his "personal favorite" is used cigarettes.

"It's the ash, the cigarette butt, it's the packaging, everything," he said.

"After we launched it in May in Canada, it was so successful, we collected over a million cigarettes in a short period of time. We had all these great organizations collecting and the tobacco industry was so excited that they launched the program in the US, in Spain."

Expect to see the project spread across Europe and possibly Mexico in the next four months, Szaky said.

It takes between 1,000 and 2,000 butts to make a plastic ashtray, and more than 200,000 to make a garden chair. Not that there's any shortage of supplies: 37 percent of the world's litter is in cigarette butts, with up to a couple trillion thrown out yearly, Szaky said.

About 35 million people across 22 countries take part in TerraCycle's collection programs, which are financed by businesses, like Old Navy clothing in the United States and Colgate, which supports the toothbrush collection.

"When we created the cigarette solution, we went to big companies and showed them plastic made from used cigarettes. They couldn't believe it and the companies got very engaged," Szaky said.

"They not only finance the program and pay for all the costs, they are out here, and are going to do very aggressive promotion."

Szaky's company began when two people had the idea of harvesting worm excrement for fertilizer. Now it employs about 100 people.

"I want to solve every kind of garbage that exists," he said. "My real goal would be that there is no such thing as garbage. Garbage doesn't exist in nature."

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