

Landfill nation: What makes consumers less likely to recycle?

August 20 2013

Consumers are more likely to toss a dented can or a chopped-up piece of paper into the trash than to recycle it, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* that examines recycling habits.

"Although products that have changed shape are still recyclable, the likelihood of a consumer recycling a product or throwing it in the trash can be determined by the extent to which it has been distorted during the consumption process," write authors Remi Trudel (Boston University) and Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta).

The authors looked at how consumers treat products that have gone through physical changes during and after consumption that "distort" the product (but do not affect its recyclability). For example, a piece of paper might get crumpled up or torn into smaller pieces, or an [aluminum](#) can might get crushed or dented. And when that happens, people are less likely to recycle.

In one study, participants were asked to evaluate a pair of scissors. Some were asked to cut either one or two sheets of paper into smaller pieces, while other consumers were given a sheet of paper and asked to evaluate the scissors without cutting the paper. Everyone was then asked to dispose of the paper on the way out (next to the exit were two identical bins, one for trash and one for recycling). Consumers recycled the whole sheet of paper more often than the smaller pieces (regardless of the total amount of paper).

Around the world, more than two billion tons of trash is generated each year, with the United States throwing away more than any other country. Understanding why consumers throw recyclable products into the [garbage](#) instead of recycling them could help companies and public policy makers find novel ways to encourage [consumers](#) to step up their recycling efforts.

"These findings point to important outcomes of the post-[consumption](#) process that have been largely ignored and provide initial insight into the [psychological processes](#) influencing recycling behavior," the authors conclude.

More information: Remi Trudel and Jennifer J. Argo. "The Effect of Product Size and Form Distortion on Consumer Recycling Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2013.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Landfill nation: What makes consumers less likely to recycle? (2013, August 20)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2013-08-landfill-nation-consumers-recycle.html>

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