

The 'whole' problem with recycling

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Findings from a University of Alberta researcher shed new light on what may be stopping people from recycling more.

Jennifer Argo, a marketing professor in the U of A's Alberta School of Business, says that people are psychologically hard-wired to believe that products that are damaged or that aren't whole—such as small or ripped paper or dented [cans](#)—are useless, and this leads users to trash them rather than recycle them. To circumvent overcrowding [landfills](#) and [environmental problems](#), Argo says consumers and manufacturers can take steps to override the urge to toss wholly recyclable items.

"We can change the way products look. We can change the way people perceive them too in terms of their usefulness," she said.

Every scrap is sacred

From their observations and study findings, Argo and co-author Remi Trudel of Boston University found that once a recyclable item ceased to retain its whole form—whether a package that was cut open or a strip of paper torn from a whole piece—users demonstrated an alarming tendency to throw it in the garbage. The process, she says, is seemingly autonomic and likely related to our literal definition of garbage as something being worthless. When it comes to blue-binning it versus using the circular [filing system](#), the size of the object does not matter; the trick, she says, is getting people to recognize that for themselves.

"We gave one group of participants a small piece of paper and asked

them to do a creative writing task and just tell us what this paper could be useful for," said Argo. "As soon as they did that, 80 per cent of the time it went into the [recycling](#). It was an automatic flip that it became useful to them again."

The crushed-can conundrum

The other challenge to changing recycling habits comes into play when the product, while still whole, is somehow damaged, imperfect or spoiled. Using a common household item from the study as an example, Argo says although some people crush their cans to make more room in the recycling bag, they overwhelmingly reject a can that is pre-crushed or otherwise dented or damaged. Again, she points out, it is all in the way the usefulness of the can's current condition is perceived.

"People see it as a damaged good that is not useful anymore in any way—what can you do with a crushed can?" Argo said. "If the can came to you crushed and you had to make the decision, our research shows that it's going in the [garbage](#)."

Change products, change beliefs?

Argo stresses the challenge to recycling is largely about changing people's beliefs. Policy-makers need to step up efforts to encourage recycling, especially when it comes to messages about the need to recycle and compost as much of household goods as possible. Size and condition are artificial determinants. Incorporating repetitive messaging from producers encouraging recycling is important, she notes, but so is looking at changing packaging.

"Make it easier to preserve the condition the package is actually in once it has been opened," said Argo. "It might mean more expensive

packaging because it's a different type.

"I think it's worth the investment because I have no doubt in my mind that people will recycle it to a greater extent than they currently do."

Provided by University of Alberta

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