

How marketing classes can rescue 'ugly produce' from becoming food waste

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At a time of [rising food costs](#) and growing food insecurity, a large percentage of food grown for consumption never reaches our tables.

Indeed, some estimates suggest that approximately 40 percent of fruits and vegetables [never even leave farms](#). Much of it gets rejected by wholesalers and retailers based on irregularities in weight, size or shape.

This desire for cosmetically appealing food also extends to consumers, as we often [prefer picture-perfect produce](#). Unsurprisingly, this wanton waste takes a significant environmental toll, with an estimated [eight to 10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions tied to unconsumed food](#).

Showing ugly produce some love

Some companies have taken strides to counter [food waste](#). A prominent example in the United States is Misfits Market, which launched in 2018.

By buying misshapen and ugly produce and reselling it at discount prices in subscription boxes, Misfits Market has grown into a [billion-dollar business](#).

Closer to home, Loblaw Companies' "[naturally imperfect](#)" line offers visually unappealing produce at lower prices, while newcomers such as Montréal-based [Food Hero](#) are developing apps to reduce a different but persistent form of waste by helping customers find deals on food approaching its best-by date.

Despite such encouraging efforts, there's still a lot of work to do on changing attitudes and behaviors to alleviate waste. This has become an important academic issue, and is increasingly being tackled by those of us in marketing, a field that has perpetuated this [cycle of waste](#).

In a recent study, we introduced our [RESCUER framework](#) designed to expose [students](#) to food waste and to generate [behavioral changes](#). We developed it over three years through research assignments undertaken by students in our classes at Carleton University. We used 90 reflective essay assignments alongside 63 sets of surveys (administered pre- and post-assignment) to develop the framework.

Steps towards change

RESCUER stands for the steps in the process of learning, action and change undertaken by students, and [combines passive and active modes of learning](#).

We first engaged students with resources—"passive" forms of learning through lectures and curated readings on [food waste](#), [irregularly shaped produce](#) and [sustainable practices](#).

Next, students engaged in an experiential learning exercise that had them actively planning, shopping for and preparing a salad with food waste issues in mind, before writing reflective journals about their experiences. Journaling allows students to articulate their feelings, thoughts and values, leads them to examine and challenge pre-conceived assumptions, practices and policies, and encourages them to be more alert when shopping for and preparing food.

We next accounted for the social influences of family, friends and peers on sustainability-minded behaviors.

Throughout the process, students developed a greater cognizance of food waste, and these issues became more readily and consistently resonant when shopping. The process also resulted in underlying problem-salience—the spontaneous evocation of the food waste problem in consumers' minds as soon as they need to buy or prepare food.

Finally, we identified factors that expedite learning and adoption processes, such as the availability of recycling and composting facilities at home and access to retailers that support [sustainable practices](#) and provide price discounts.

Student comments

The results? Well, students emerged with a much deeper understanding of food waste and an increase in responsible attitudes and behaviors. This increase in responsibility is evident in the comments from students about RESCUER, including: "I am cognizant of the negative effects that food abnormalities have on the environment due to food waste issues. On that account, I will surely change some of my habits to match my perceived identity. Seeing myself as, and wanting to be more of, a pro-environmental person, I want my actions regarding food waste to match this desired self-identity."

The students' newfound awareness also translated into more responsible consumption behaviors. They started choosing imperfect produce, as one student reported: "I bought abnormal carrots and green onions and even considered some oddly shaped bell peppers in my purchase decisions."

They also became less picky about expiration dates, according to another student who was conscious of preventing waste: "Completing this assignment has increased my awareness to ensure to take the foods on the shelves that are approaching their best-before date as opposed to selecting the freshest option each time."

Another responsible action is in how students spread what they have learned, as one noted: "I am certainly going to share what I have learned from the readings with friends and family."

These qualitative findings are further validated by our survey results. A

[comparative analysis](#) was conducted before and after the framework's implementation. It revealed that students' awareness, understanding and actions related to sustainability were all improved after having completed the exercise.

Educators can change attitudes

Overall, we've seen our RESCUER framework cultivate a shift towards responsible consumption, and it also situates marketing education within a sustainability narrative.

Ours is an example of how educators can play a crucial role in changing attitudes and actions, and in equipping future professionals with tools to tackle the [challenges of sustainability](#).

Conversations about what [sustainability entails](#), how it can be encouraged and its integration into education is more relevant than ever as we strive for ways to work towards a more sustainable future.

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