

Businesses Turn to Recycling And Find It's Good Business

In the Pacific Northwest, the Pay 'n Save drug store chain recycles more than a million plastic bags a month. In Ohio, the American Honda Motor Company has set up a recycling plant to handle trash from its four factories in the state.

In New York State, The Reader's Digest Association has reduced trash at its Pleasantville plant by 30 tons a week at a savings of \$100,000.

Businesses are setting up or greatly expanding recycling programs in response to rising disposal fees and mounting government pressure. In the late 1980's communities began collecting newspapers, bottles and cans from residential neighborhoods, and now attention is focused on business.

"Just as society at large has developed a much more significant and long-lasting commitment to recycling and the environment, so have businesses," said Andrea Sussman, director of communications for the National Recycling Coalition in Washington.

Helping the Bottom Line

While it may have taken a nudge from government to prompt businesses to recycle, "they are also finding that recycling does not make them sacrifice the bottom line, it actually helps them improve it," said Ms. Sussman.

Seven states and the District of Columbia have passed laws requiring recycling programs. Eleven other states have adopted goals or guidelines so ambitious that they can only be met by widespread community recycling.

For instance, Florida has a goal of recycling 30 percent of its trash by 1994. "Since commercial waste is more than half of our total we obviously can't reach our goal without their participation," said Ronald Henricks, environmental supervisor for the Department of Environmental Regulation.

Instead of passing a law, Florida is allowing other pressures to encourage recycling. For instance, landfill operators have raised their fees, which now run from \$59 a ton for dumping trash to as high as \$200. But the fear of legislation is also compelling. "We would rather be in the position of telling the government what we did than having them tell us what to do," said Joseph Alonge, investment recovery coordinator for the Florida Power Corporation, a public utility serving 32 counties in northern and central Florida.

Microsoft, a software company in Redmond, Wash., established its recycling program in part because of worker demand. "Employees are used to recycling at home and so they wonder why their companies aren't doing it," said Peter Christiansen, the waste reduction and recycling planner for the State Department of Ecology.

Gerry Tinlin, the general manager of a hotel, the 100-room Ocean Key House in Key West, Fla., said his chambermaids compete to see who can collect the most recyclable cans, bottles and paper from rooms.

A Need for Expertise

Businesses generate more than half the nation's garbage, and as trash goes, it is rich in valuable materials like corrugated cardboard and white paper. Some businesses have long recycled materials with lucrative resale markets, including corrugated cardboard and scrap metals. Those companies are now expanding their programs to include less valuable materials, while those that had no program are starting.

The problem many businesses face is identifying what can be recycled. "We're bankers, not recyclers," said Marie O'Neill, director of marketing for Liberty Bank of Connecticut.

The bank, which has 21 branches, asked the advice of the recycling coordinator in Middletown, where it has its headquarters. Municipalities around the country have created such posts.

The coordinator found that waste paper was the vast majority of the bank's trash and suggested recycling bins at each desk. The outcome was almost too good.

"We realized we would be collecting a ton of paper a week and had nowhere to put it," Ms. O'Neill said. "We are now recycling 95 percent of everything we use."

But a new problem has cropped up: so much waste paper is being recycled around the state that its value has plummeted, and the cleaning company now wants to increase its rates.

Leslie Legg, an analyst with the National Solid Wastes Management Association, a Washington trade association, said that experience would be repeated: as more companies start recycling, a growing volume of material will drive their value down. But that will lead to new uses and greater demand, she said.