

Recycling Online



Getting rewarded for recycling – Part 1

by Roger Guttentag

Residential and workplace recycling programs have always placed a heavy reliance on educational and promotional methods to initiate and sustain the public's willingness to participate in the recycling process. Yet there is probably no greater – and in many ways more vexing – challenge than figuring out how to motivate the majority of people to set aside recyclables properly and consistently for collection. Unlike the other aspects of recycling program management which are dominated by technical issues the most successful recycling motivational strategies rely on an accurate understanding of the community for determining the best way to combine social marketing techniques (based on the community's needs or interests) with some form of incentive.

The North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (NCDPPEA) provides a good summary of the type of incentives that can be used to promote recycling participation. These can be broadly characterized as cost reduction incentives, such as pay as you

throw (PAYT), or other types of variable waste pricing systems, and rewards-based incentives. Rewards-based recycling programs can use cash rewards, non-cash rewards (such as free products or services) and/or redemption-based rewards (RBR) where participants earn some form of artificial currency, typically points, that can be redeemed for special offers, vouchers or coupons from specific companies. RBR programs are a recent innovation that were first pioneered by the Recyclebank company in 2005 and are now being used in hundreds of communities in the U.S., with even more coming on-line as other companies begin to offer similar RBR services.

Looking over RBR

The following table identifies RBR program providers that I was able to find on the web along with examples of communities which use them. The websites for both RBR service providers and representative communities are listed at the end of this column.

Web Address Directory

Alameda County Ready Set Recycle contest
Atlanta ReCart program
Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority –
Recyclebank pilot program
City of Chesapeake, Virginia
City of Los Angeles – Recyclebank pilot program
City of Wentzville Recycling Rewards program
Econservation Institute – PAYT Resources
Grand Rapids City Points program
Hamilton County Solid Waste Management
Plan Update
Philadelphia Recycling Rewards
Recyclebank
Recycling Perks
Rewards for Recycling
Richfield Management, LLC
Social Marketing Incentives – North Carolina
Division of Pollution Prevention and
Environmental Assistance
Think Green Rewards (Waste Management)

<http://www.readysetrecyclecontest.org/>
<http://www.atlrecart.org/>

<http://tinyurl.com/CCRBpilot>
<http://www.cityofchesapeake.net/>
<http://tinyurl.com/LARBpilot>
<http://tinyurl.com/WentzRewards>
<http://www.paytnow.org/resources.html>
<http://www.mygrcitypoints.com/>

<http://tinyurl.com/HamiltonCoProg>
<http://www.phillyrecyclingpays.com/>
<http://www.recyclebank.com/>
<http://recyclingperks.com/>
<http://www.rewardsforrecycling.com/>
<http://tinyurl.com/RichMgmt>

<http://tinyurl.com/P2Pays>
<https://thinkgreenrewards.wm.com/>

All these RBR programs appear to operate in similar ways. Residents and businesses that are served by them enroll online to set up an account. The program then uses some type of system, usually a “smart cart” that is equipped with a RFID (radio frequency identification) tag encoded with the participant's account information that is scanned every time its contents are collected. Each service provider has its own procedure for calculating how many points each participant earns based on set-out rates and total quantities of recyclable materials collected on the route or within the total community. Points are then credited to each participant's account which can then be redeemed for specific types of rewards such as product coupons.

Underlying factors supporting RBR program growth

There appears to be four principal reasons favoring the recent explosive growth of RBR programs. First, there is the availability of inexpensive, but effective, RFID tag technology for tracking participation on the collection route without negatively impacting operational productivity. Second, the widespread adoption of automated, single-stream collection systems simplifies the participant tracking process so that only one cart, rather than multiple containers, needs to be tagged. Third, the redemption process is very similar to other types of consumer loyalty programs that are being used making them appear familiar and easy to use. Fourth, it relies on the widespread availability of web access, especially broadband services, in U.S. households to the point where it can be considered a basic utility like telephone services. Finally, a fifth reason favoring the continued adoption of RBR programs may be emerging in the form of smartphone apps for redeeming program points. The MyGRCityPoints site has a link for information on the availability of an app for Android, BlackBerry and iPhones that will allow participants to check their accounts, determine on a map where they can redeem their points locally and then redeem them onsite. I will be frankly amazed if similar smartphone apps don't appear for other RBR programs in the near future.

RBR Program Effectiveness

The rapid proliferation of RBR programs in the U.S. would seem to indicate that they

work very well. However, there is very little published data on the actual impact of these programs on municipal material recovery rates and costs. One exception to this situation was a white paper “Creating Economic Incentives” published August 2010 by the Hamilton County Solid Waste Management District, Ohio which evaluated the results achieved through a Recyclebank program that ran in City of Montgomery starting October 2008 (according to the report it was scheduled to conclude at the end of December 2010). The goal of this program was to increase the residential participation rate by 25 percent and raise the recycling rate from 20 to 32 percent. According to this report, participation increased by about 27 percent but the recycling rate was 28.6 percent as of December 2009. It was also noted that, in addition to providing Recyclebank services, the recycling collection program was upgraded to a single stream cart system. The report goes on to state a local community was able to achieve similar recycling collection increases just by switching to a cart-based system.

A much broader discussion of the merits of RBR programs, as exemplified by Recyclebank, when compared to PAYT with regard to waste disposal impacts and costs was published as a two part article “Recycling Incentives” in the February and

RBR service provider	Example communities
MyGRcitypoints	Grand Rapids, MI
Recyclebank	Atlanta, GA; City of Los Angeles; Central Contra Costa County, CA
Recycling Perks	City of Chesapeake, VA
Rewards for Recycling	Communities serviced by Richfield Management, MI
Think Green Rewards	Communities serviced by Waste Management

March 2011 issues of *Resource Recycling* (The articles can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/Skumatz1>, <http://tinyurl.com/Skumatz2>). The authors make the argument that Recyclebank-type programs target a narrower segment of the municipal waste stream and have a higher marginal cost per additional recovered ton than PAYT programs. Hopefully, more data on RBR programs will become available in the future to allow a more thorough evaluation of these conclusions.

Other kinds of recycling rewards

While RBR programs may be enjoying the spotlight as the hottest current trend in recycling motivation strategies, the old-fashioned prize system as a participation incentive method is still being used. For example, the City of Wentzville, Missouri randomly selects addresses which, if they have their recycling cart set-out on the right

collection day, win a prize basket of gift cards and products. Alameda County, California, on the other hand, holds the Ready Set Recycle Contest where, during a specific time period, residents on a waste collection route may be notified that their bins may be randomly selected for sorting. The resident with the bin that had the least amount of recyclables found of all bins sorted on that route wins a cash prize – and becomes eligible for winning a larger grand cash prize.

Next month

My survey of web-based information on recycling incentives will go across the Atlantic to look at what’s been done recently in the U.K.

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