

Recycling Online



Mailing it in

by Roger Guttentag

Below, find a sample of some of the mail-back programs that have gained traction in recent years.

Post-holiday recovery

It's a question nearly as old as religion itself: What do you do with busted holiday lights? Two online vendors, Christmas Light Source and Holiday LEDs, will accept your old strings of lights for recycling, and they operate mail-back systems. Meanwhile, for those of us that have piles of old holiday greeting cards that are no longer wanted, an alternative to the curbside recycling cart is to utilize a mail-in program run by Nevada-based St. Jude's Ranch for Children, an organization for helping at-risk children. The card fronts are used to create new greeting cards that are sold to support St. Jude's various programs.

Unwanted electronics

The Electronics TakeBack Coalition maintains a directory of companies with electronic device take-back programs within the U.S. A description is provided for each manufacturer or retailer program, including mail-back options and links for other relevant information.

Tackling other hard-to-recycle materials

The table below illustrates some of the mail-in options for a variety of other materials that may not be collected curbside or in convenient drop-off locations. For some products, such as expanded polystyrene,

industry groups have worked to organize an infrastructure to help consumers that are looking to move material into the recycling stream instead of the landfill.

Checklist for success

Before using any mail-back option, make sure that you determine the following:

- Is the program still active and accepting materials?
- Which shipping address should be used?
- What products or materials are acceptable to the receiver?
- Are shipping containers to be provided by the sender or receiver?
- Is there a weight limit on what can be sent?
- Are shipping costs covered by the sender or receiver?

Final thoughts

I could not find any data or even rough estimates regarding how much total material is recovered through mail-back programs (if any readers have a data source, please let me know). Thus, it's difficult to quantify the method's overall contribution to waste diversion.

However, even without hard numbers on these initiatives, it's important to give the mail-in methodology appropriate attention.

One of the big discussion topics going into 2016 and beyond relates to the future

The recovery of products for recycling or reuse typically relies on some type of either curbside or drop-off collection method. However, there is actually a third way – utilizing third-party shipping services such as those provided by the U.S. Postal Service, UPS or FedEx.

Opportunities to recycle or reuse by mail have become more common for several reasons:

- The scope of municipal waste diversion has widened considerably over the last 15 years from its initial emphasis on core recyclables, such as newspapers or food and beverage containers, to include a very large variety of products, especially those that are characterized as “hard to recycle.” (The Center for Hard to Recycle Materials operated by Eco-Cycle in Boulder, Colo. provides an extensive list that shows what can fall into this category). However, curbside or even drop-off options are often not available for these materials.
- During the same time period, access to package delivery services provided by public or private entities has expanded through the creation of thousands of new staffed and unattended drop-off locations.
- Finally, many companies and organizations that promote the recycling of specific products are taking advantage of these trends by offering a mail-back option as part of their goal of maximizing business and residential access to recycling opportunities.

Hard-to-recycle material	Program
No. 5 polypropylene plastics	Preserve Products' Gimme 5
All types of separated or mixed materials	TerraCycle
Cartons	List of mail-back locations maintained by the Carton Council
Clothing and shoes	Community Recycling
Expanded polystyrene	List of mail-back locations maintained by the EPS Industry Alliance
Single-use coffee pods	Preserve Products' Gimme 5
Single-use batteries	Directory of mail-back programs maintained by the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation

of recycling in the U.S. and globally, and this necessitates giving a hard look at how further progress can be made for transitioning to a circular economy. The emergence of a full-blown circular economy will, in turn, depend on the emergence of a more robust reverse logistics system that can efficiently return end-of-life products for repair, reuse or recycling. Perhaps the basic structure for such a reverse logistics system can be seen in the current collection of mail-in programs. For this reason, it is worth taking a closer look at the current impact of these programs and understanding how their effectiveness can be enhanced.

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houses all of his Recycling Online columns and other resources for recycling professionals of all stripes.

Web Address Directory

Carton Council Mail-In Program	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Cartons
Christmas Light Source – Holiday Lights Recycling	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Xmas
Community Recycling	communityrecycling.biz
Eco-Cycle – Center for Hard to Recycle Materials	ecocycle.org/charm
Electronics Take-Back Programs in the U.S.	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-ETBC
EPS Packaging Alliance – Mail-Back Recycling	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-EPS
Holiday LEDS – Holiday Lights Recycling	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Xmas2
Keurig Mail-Back Coffee Pod Program	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Pods
Patagonia Product Recycling Program	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Clothes
Preserve Products' Gimme 5 Program	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-PP
Rhode Island Resource Recovery – Single-Use Battery Mail-In Programs Listing	rirrc.org/single-use-batteries
St. Jude's Ranch – Recycled Card Program	tinyurl.com/Mail-In-Cards
TerraCycle	terracycle.com

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