

Every bit of paper deserves a second chance

This morning, as I did a little kitchen cleaning, I was faced with a decision. What should I do with my empty paper coffee cup? Trash it? Recycle it?

I recently learned from the Maine Recycles Web site (www.mainerecycles.com) that waste paper alone, if we recycled it all, would get our state to its 50% recycling goal. Last year, Mainers recycled 42% of the paper they used — a good amount, but still leaving a whopping 300,000 tons that ended up in a landfill or incinerator. This is paper that could have been remade into a variety of usable products such as newspapers, corrugated cardboard, grocery bags, stationery, picnic plates, books, packaging, and much more.

Which brings me back to my question. The coffee cup. Can I recycle it? How does a person know whether an item made of paper is recyclable or not?

The simple answer is that it depends on where you live. Every town is different. The best place to find information about your community recycling program is at your local transfer station, public works department, or town office.

Why don't all towns recycle the same? The type of paper a local recycling program accepts is a matter of economics, markets, and location. First of all, there must be a buyer for the materials. Also, the community has to have a large enough quantity so that it's financially feasible to transport. Small towns with fewer people and businesses often can't amass enough material to make it worthwhile. Recycling is a business that relies on economy of scale. The more that is collected, the more cost effective it is to run the program. Technically, just about anything is recyclable, but for a program to succeed, it needs a stable market and steady stream of material.

Another variable is how your community collects recyclables. Some Maine communities use a single-sort or single-stream system. This means that you can put all your recyclables (i.e. paper, metal, plastic, glass) into one bin. Often when a community adopts single-stream recycling, they also expand the types of materials they take. The items can be extensive and include newspapers, magazines, boxes, and junk mail.

So, does this mean you can toss in a paper coffee cup? What about an ice cream carton? Paper flour sack? Pizza box?

Cleanliness is important. Less mess means better quality for selling to paper manufacturers, who after all are using this as a raw material to make new paper. So what if a pizza box has food on it? Now you have to use your judgment. If it HAD food, past tense, but is merely stained, it's okay to put it in the single-sort bin. If it HAS food residue, present tense, it's garbage!

What about paper that is coated with wax or plastic or those multi-layered boxes used for milk, juices, and broth? Paper coated with wax is OK, but plastic is a NO. That makes it

tricky! Sometimes it's hard to tell if the coating is waxed or plastic. My suggestion is unless it is heavily and obviously plastic, toss it in. Most boxes are acceptable. Milk cartons, butter boxes, broth boxes and frozen food boxes are accepted in mixed paper.

So what about the coffee cup? If my town offers the all-in-one-bin approach, the answer is yes, if it's not plastic-coated and I've rinsed it well. If my community collects materials in separate containers, probably not. I'll have to check with my town office. In the meantime, I think I will purchase a reusable travel mug and not deal with the paper waste at all!

So next time think before you throw it away. Recycle that paper and cardboard. After all, everything deserves a second chance.

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