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New Survey Reveals Gaps in Consumer Recycling Behavior and Knowledge

Majority report confusion around recycling, despite paper as a solution for its ease of recyclability and its seven-time reuse lifecycle

McLean, Va. (August 26, 2021) – Plagued with guilt when they don't recycle, millions of Americans know their actions will have an adverse effect on the environment and the people around them. While 95% of Americans say they recycle (and only 25% of them recycle 'some of the time'), fewer than half know the basics of recycling, according to the 2021 Consumer Recycling Habits survey by the [Paper and Packaging Board](#) (P+PB) for its sustainability initiative.

A July 2021 survey of 1,005 U.S. consumers age 18 or older revealed that Americans are largely confused about the proper ways to recycle, including what materials are recyclable. In fact, nearly half do not know that boxes should be emptied and broken down for pick-up (49%), where they can drop off recycling (46%) or information about their designated recycling days (44%). When it comes to recycling extra-large items, over a quarter of people do not know how to properly break down and recycle these items (29%), and roughly the same amount of people don't know who to contact with recycling questions (27%).

"As individuals take steps toward a more sustainable future, choosing paper and paper packaging can be a key step because paper products are sourced from a renewable resource – trees." said Mary Anne Hansan, president of P+PB. "With this survey, we hope to increase awareness around recycling, encourage daily recycling habits and propel people to become a force for nature. Not only is recycling good for the environment, it also can boost our happiness and confidence."

Despite Confusion, Paper and Boxes are Easy to Recycle – and Can Be Reused Up to Seven Times

Regardless of the varied views of and habits on recycling, nearly half of Americans (47%) agree that paper is one of the easiest materials to recycle, compared to other materials such as plastic (34%), metal (11%) or glass (9%).

The need for increased recycling is at an important inflection point, in which consumers are shopping online more than ever in parallel to rising concern around climate change. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, [Americans spent \\$791.7 billion on e-commerce](#) in 2020, up 32.4% from 2019. More packages arriving to homes and businesses means more packing materials and boxes that should be properly recycled.

Recycling's Impact on Americans' Happiness, Confidence and Saving the Planet

The Consumer Recycling Habits survey also revealed that the adoption of ongoing recycling routines (or lack thereof) may correlate to Americans' overall feeling of happiness and confidence. Nearly 4 in 5 (78%) people who do not always recycle confess they feel guilty



about this sub-par behavior, with women more likely than men to feel guilty when they do not recycle (82% vs. 72%).

People who always or frequently recycle say they feel more confident (84%) than those who only sometimes or rarely recycle (73%); report they are happy (87% vs. 79%); maintain a healthy work-life balance (83% vs. 70%); and are happy in their romantic relationships (93% vs. 84%).

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Beyond personal happiness and confidence, Americans who always or frequently recycle say they are doing their part to save the planet (88%) – compared to those who only sometimes or rarely recycle (67%).

Unfortunately, 76% of Americans do not know how many times paper and cardboard can be recycled. Many may be surprised to know that these materials can be recycled and repurposed up to seven times when balanced with new fiber. Educating consumers around all the innovative and useful ways that this material can be repurposed through recycling or repurposing in creative ways is key to further adopting the practice into their everyday lives. Americans can follow three simple steps to adopt paper and cardboard recycling into their everyday lives to ensure a more Earth-friendly environment:

- **Empty** packaging and boxes, removing all excess paper, products and other materials
- **Flatten** the box by safely breaking down boxes at every corner
- **Recycle** the cardboard and paper materials according to local guidelines

“It’s incredibly important for people to help ensure a healthy and sustainable planet – whether it’s choosing paper over other materials, recycling or reusing paper products to help reduce waste altogether,” Hansan added.

The 2021 Consumer Recycling Habits survey is part of P+PB’s broader initiatives on the benefits of paper recyclability, with sustainability messaging at the center. To learn more about this effort from P+PB, visit www.paperfornature.com.

Majority of Americans recycle – with paper being the most popular recyclable material – but there are still significant knowledge gaps:

- 95% of Americans report that they recycle. However, 2 in 3 (63%) confess they do not always do this. Instead, about 1 in 3 (34%) recycle frequently while a quarter (25%) – or nearly 62 million Americans¹ - recycle some of the time, at best.
- Despite the fact that nearly all Americans recycle, fewer than half say they know the basics of recycling, like how boxes should be cleaned out and broken down for pick-up (49%) or where they could drop off recycling if they needed to (46%). Fewer know the specific recycling days (44%) or time of day (36%) their recycling is picked up. Even less know how to recycle extra-large items (29%) or who to contact for recycling questions (27%). Still fewer (15%) know whether the local recycling is single or multi-stream.
- Plastics and paper, more than any other materials, are the most commonly recycled. Close to half (46%) of recyclers report that they recycle plastic the most often, with 35% saying the same about paper. Far fewer report that they recycle metal (13%) or glass (6%) so frequently.
 - But when it comes to paper, many are in the dark about what types of paper can actually be recycled. In fact, only about 3 in 5 Americans know that pizza boxes (57%) and paper cups (56%) can be recycled, depending on local guidelines. Less than half (46%) know the same about wrapping paper.
- Paper takes the prize for being the simplest material to recycle. About 1 in 2 (47%) recyclers report that paper is the easiest product to recycle. Fewer say the same about plastic (34%), metal (11%) or glass (9%).
- There is a lack of universal knowledge around the product types that can be recycled. While a majority of Americans recognize the more common products that can be recycled, like plastic beverage bottles (81%), cardboard shipping boxes (78%) and glass bottles (75%), far fewer are aware that they can recycle milk cartons (64%), and only about 1 in 4 know that aerosol cans can be recycled (23%).

There's also a knowledge gap around paper innovations and recyclability:

- What's more is that Americans are largely unaware of the many products that can be furnished from recycled paper. For starters, fewer than 3 in 5 Americans know that paper products like magazines (57%), toilet or tissue paper (55%), or food packaging (such as pasta and cereal boxes) (58%) can be made out of recycled paper.

- Many Americans are not aware of the lifespan of paper and cardboard shipping boxes. In fact, 3 in 4 Americans report they do not know how many times paper (76%) and cardboard shipping boxes (75%) can be recycled.
 - However, even among those Americans who report they are aware, there is a lack of knowledge as many assert that these products could be recycled up to 5 times (paper 77% and cardboard boxes 81%). The reality is that paper and cardboard products can be recycled between 5 and 7 times.

The reasons people don't recycle are easily solved:

- Close to 3 in 10 (28%) of those who don't always recycle say it's because recycling pick-up is not an easy option where they live. Almost 1 in 5 report they don't recycle because they simply do not know what products can be recycled (18%) or their local recycling guidelines (18%).
- Others don't recycle because of the burden it puts on their time and energy. In fact, close to 1 in 5 Americans who do not always recycle say it's because it is too time-consuming (19%) or too difficult sorting larger quantities of recyclables they might have from parties or events (13%).
- And millions simply don't have the headspace for recycling. Fourteen percent – or nearly 34 million² - Americans who do not always recycle admit they do not because they simply never really think about recycling.

People know recycling makes an impact on our planet, and feel remorse when they don't recycle:

- Close to 4 in 5 (78%) Americans who do not always recycle confess they feel guilty about this sub-par behavior.
- Among those who are remorseful because they do not always recycle, close to half (49%) say they feel this way because they know their waste is likely to end up in a landfill, while nearly the same amount (44%) know they are not doing all that they can to help the environment.
- Among those who feel guilty about not always recycling, about 3 in 10 say it is because it is something they know they are expected to do (31%), because they know they are not setting the best example for their children or others (30%) or because they are not helping their local community (27%).



- In fact, among those who have compunction that they do not always recycle, more than 1 in 4 (27%) report that it is because they let the inconvenience of recycling overshadow doing something for the greater good.

Did you know that people who recycle tend to lead happier and more confident lives?

- Americans who always or frequently recycle are more likely than their peers who recycle less often (sometimes/rarely) to:
 - Feel they are doing their part to protect the planet (88% vs. 67%)
 - Feel confident (84% vs. 73%)
 - Report they are happy (87% vs. 79%)
 - Maintain a healthy work-life balance (83% vs. 70%)
 - Are happy in their relationship with their partner (93% vs. 84%)
- In fact, someone's lack of recycling can impact the health of a relationship. Nearly one in five (18%) – or 44 million³ Americans – admit that learning someone does not recycle is a dating turn-off.

Demographics also play a role when it comes to recycling habits:

- Northeasterners (79%) and Westerners (77%) are more likely than their counterparts in the South (63%) and Midwest (68%) to always recycle.
- Boomers are more likely than younger generations to report that they always recycle (43% vs. 32% Gen X, 33% Millennials and 33% Gen Z).
 - And Boomers are more likely than their younger counterparts to know the specific pick-up days of their recycling (53% vs. Gen Z 35%, Millennials 38%, and Gen X 41%).
- Men are more likely than women (74% vs. 66%) to always or frequently recycle, but women are more likely than men to feel guilty when they do not recycle (82% vs. 72%).
- Men are more likely than women to know how to recycle larger items (32% vs. 25%) or whether their local recycling is single or multi-stream (21% vs. 10%).
- During the holiday season, younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) are more likely than older generations (Gen X and Boomers) to feel guilty about the extra waste (52% vs. 26%).
 - And younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) are more likely than their older counterparts (Gen X and Boomers) to recycle more



frequently during the winter holidays (47% vs. 19%).

- People who identify as parents or guardians understand the importance of imparting recycling knowledge on their children. Nearly all (98%) parents plan on having their child learn about recycling. Among them, about 4 in 5 (79%) plan to shoulder this responsibility and teach their children at home.
 - Those parents who recycle always/frequently are more likely than those who recycle less frequently (84% vs. 65%) to plan on having their child learn about recycling by them or at home.
 - Beyond their home, there are other places parents want their kids to learn about recycling. This includes school (56%), educational programming on tv/online (41%), and friends and family (32%).

The P+PB Consumer Recycling Habits survey was fielded in July 2021 in collaboration with [Kelton Global](#), distributed at random to 1,005 U.S. consumers age 18 and above.

About the Paper and Packaging Board

The Paper and Packaging Board promotes the use of paper products and paper-based packaging by highlighting how their sustainable nature and the industry's practices help contribute to a healthier planet. Forty-six U.S. manufacturers and importers collectively fund the national marketing campaign. www.paperfornature.com

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^[1] Extrapolated from 61,581,245 recyclers, which was derived from taking 25% of those who reported they recycle some of the time in the total population of 246,324,983 Americans aged 18+ (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2018)

^[2] Extrapolated from 34,485,497 recyclers, which was derived from taking 14% of those who report they do not always recycle in the total population of 246,324,983 Americans aged 18+ (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2018)

^[3] Extrapolated from 44,338,496 recyclers, which was derived from taking 18% of those who reported that learning someone does not recycle is a dating turn-off in the total population of 246,324,983 Americans aged 18+ (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2018)