In the last decade of the 20th century, the recycling movement in the U.S. has come under increasing attack from various parts of the media and industry—even though the U.S. public has dramatically increased its recycling activities in that same period. Any recycling startup effort must be aware of the arguments of these opponents. The following reviews these arguments and explains how they are exaggerated or just plain wrong.

Recycling Is a Hassle

The most common argument against recycling is that it’s a hassle. Opponents have always insisted that ordinary citizens would not take the time to sort the recyclables from their trash.

Despite these claims, the number of municipal curbside recycling collection programs climbed from about 1,000 to 8,817 during the period from 1988 to 1996, according to BioCycle magazine. Recycling programs like these are now available to 51 percent of the population. Facilities for composting yard trimmings grew from about 700 to 3,260 over the same period. These efforts complement more than 9,000 recycling drop-off centers and tens of thousands of workplace collection programs. According to the EPA, the nation recycled or composted 27 percent of its municipal solid waste in 1995, up from 9.6 percent in 1980.

Recycled Materials Are More Expensive To Use

Opponents typically characterize the recycling movement as misguided altruism that is both unnecessary and expensive. Certainly, the goals of the recycling movement have always included reducing environmental damage from activities such as strip mining and clearcutting in favor of conserving energy, reducing pollution, and minimizing solid waste in manufacturing new products. However, a number of recent major studies have shown that recycled materials, because they
Second rebuttal: The second argument against recycling involves economics. The writer counterargues by referring to studies that prove recycled materials are actually less expensive. (But wouldn't it help to see some numbers here?)

Third rebuttal: This objection to recycling jumps on the antigovernment bandwagon. The writer answers this objection in two ways: first, that the objection is promoted by organizations that are corporations threatened by the recycling movement; and second, that surveys of public opinion have shown recycling is generally supported.

Transitions and lead-ins: Notice that the first sentence of just about every individual rebuttal section begins almost heavy handedly with words like “Another common objection to recycling....” Although this might seem repetitive, it guarantees that readers know where they’ve been, where they, and where they are headed in this document.

Recycling Means More Intrusion by Big Government

Another common argument against recycling is that it’s just one more instance of big government intruding into every corner of our private lives. Actually, these arguments come primarily from think tanks, including the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute (both in Washington, D.C.), the Reason Foundation (in Santa Monica, Calif.), and the Waste Policy Center (in Leesburg, Va.)—all vigorous anti-recycling operations. These organizations are funded in part by companies in the packaging, consumer-product, and waste-management industries. These industries fear what might happen if consumers begin seeking environmentally friendly alternatives to these industries’ products and services. Anti-recyclers maintain that government bureaucrats have imposed recycling on people against their will. They evoke images of Big Brother hiding behind every recycling bin. Yet several consumer researchers, such as the Rowland Company in New York, have found that recycling enjoys strong support because people believe it is good for the environment and conserves resources—not because they feel they have been forced into recycling by government edict.

Recycling Is Expensive, Not Cost-Effective

The argument that recycling is too expensive and not cost-effective is not only wrong but devious. Approaching the question as accountants, we must determine whether adding recycling to a traditional waste-management system will increase the overall cost of the system over the long term. The answer, in large part, depends on the design and maturity of the recycling program and the rate of participation within the community.

Recycling-program maturity. Costs decline as programs mature and expand. New curbside recycling collection programs are typically inefficient because they duplicate existing trash-collection systems. In time, cities increase the efficiency of their recycling collection systems by changing truck designs, collection schedules, and truck routes. For example, Visalia, Calif., has developed a truck that collects refuse and recyclable materials simultaneously. And Fayetteville, Ark., has added curbside recycling with no increase in residential bills by cutting back waste collection from twice to once weekly.
Rate of participation. As citizen participation in recycling programs increases, costs go down. Cities with comparatively high levels of recycling, per-ton recycling collection costs are much lower than in cities with low recycling rates. A North Carolina Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources study found that in municipalities with recycling rates greater than 12 percent, the per-ton cost of recycling was lower than that for trash disposal. Higher recycling rates allow cities to use equipment more efficiently and generate greater revenues to offset collection costs. Adding in increased sales of recyclable materials and reductions in landfill disposal costs, high-recycling cities can break even or make money from recycling.

We’re Not Running Out of Trees

Anti-recyclers rightly point out that more trees are growing in the U.S. than ever before and that new forests are started as soon as trees are cut. However, this perspective fails to take into account that, in the southern United States, for example, where most of the trees used to make paper are grown, the proportion of pine forest in plantations has risen from 2.5 percent in 1950 to more than 40 percent in 1990, with a concomitant loss of natural pine forest. At this rate, the acreage of pine plantations will overtake that of natural pine forests in the South during the 1990s and will approach 70 percent of all pine forests the next few decades afterwards. While pine plantations are excellent for growing wood, they are far less suited than natural forests are for providing animal habitat and preserving biodiversity. Paper recycling extends the overall supply of fiber and can thus help reduce the pressure to convert remaining natural forests to tree farms.

Conclusion

Recycling is not a threat to U.S. industry, an inconvenience, or another instance of big government invading private lives. We must get past these fears and half-truths and study how communities can improve efficiency and increase participation. Increasing the efficiency of municipal recycling, establishing price incentives, and capitalizing on the environmental and industrial benefits of recycling will enable recycling to meet its full potential.

References

www.techreview.com/articles/oct97/recycle.html. See this source for all other references.