

The Recycling Symbol and You

The recycling symbol is known worldwide and is seen in the media, found on recycling receptacles, and on product packaging. But how much do you really know about this common symbol? Dig a little deeper into its history and meaning with this issue of Sustainable News You Can Use.

It started with a student competition over 30 years ago. With the rise of environmentalism and the first Earth Day on April 20, 1970, the Container Corporation of America, a large producer of recycled paper, saw an opportunity to raise environmental awareness. The company sponsored a nationwide environmental design contest for high school and college students. The winning entry was designed and submitted by Gary Anderson, an architecture student at the University of Southern California. The recycling symbol he created is now recognized worldwide.

Each element of the symbol has significance. With its three folded arrows chasing each other in a triangle, the recycling symbol is patterned in part after a Möbius strip, which represents an unending cycle or closed loop system. Each arrow stands for an important stage in the recycling process. This system can only be successful if the entire cycle is completed.

The first arrow represents **collection**. This stage is familiar to most of us. It involves separating recyclables from other items we discard, cleaning and preparing them, and then either placing them at the curbside for pickup or taking them to a collection center.

The second arrow represents **remanufacturing - reprocessing**. Once items have been collected, they are sent to a recycling facility, where the items are sorted, cleaned and processed. The facility then sells the cleaned materials to manufacturing facilities. The manufacturers, in turn, use the recycled materials to create new products to sell.

The third arrow represents the **purchase of products made from recycled materials**. To close the loop in the recycling process, consumers must not only recycle the items they discard, but also purchase new products made from recycled materials. This step is necessary in order to successfully complete the recycling process.

The symbol has many variations.

Look for the recycling symbol on product packaging. It can have two different meanings: recycled or recyclable.

Recycled: The product or its packaging is made partly of recycled materials. If a number, such as 20%, accompanies the symbol, this represents the percentage of recycled materials used in the manufacturing of the product.

Recyclable: The product is *potentially* recyclable—if it is one of the materials that are collected for recycling in your area. Plastics are embossed with a simplified version of this symbol, with a number 1-7 in the center indicating the type of plastic resin used in the product.

Get the local angle.

On the SU campus and throughout Onondaga County, we look to the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency (OCRRA) as the local recycling authority. Next time you see the recyclable symbol and are not sure what it represents, check out the wealth of resources on the OCRRA web site at: <http://www.ocrra.org>. For additional information on the terms 'recycled' and 'recyclable', which are governed by the Federal Trade Commission, view: Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims.

For more information on sustainability efforts and activities across campus and in our community, please visit our web site at <http://sustainability.syr.edu/>. To be added to or removed from this list, send an e-mail to <mailto:sustain@syr.edu> with your request.