

TERRACYCLE: Forget recycle, *up-cycle!*

After being dismissed as ‘tree-huggers’ for decades, proponents of environmentally conscious business practices – green business – now see their proposals taking hold. Packaging companies proudly promote their ‘post-consumer’ recycled content; paper and printing companies include their pre-consumer content of scraps and test copies; and even the 2010 Winter Olympics medals were made out of recycled electronics. However, the challenge of recycling continues to be finding ways to use waste materials in order to keep them out of landfills. Every old television, rubber tire, or newspaper saved from a landfill dump is a positive move, but success continues to be measured in small percentages, with the larger percentage continuing to represent millions of tons of garbage clogging the landfills.

What if you could take a non-recyclable material and re-purpose it into a new product, giving it a new retail life and saving it from the landfill? Welcome to the world of ‘*up-cycling*’. In Trenton, New Jersey, a young company named TerraCycle is leading the way in this new world with over 100 products made from people’s trash using an innovative program called Sponsored Waste.

Using community-based ‘TerraCycle Brigades’ in schools and charities, the company purchases its raw materials from recycling drives. Stonyfield Farm yogurt pots go for 3 cents each, and Capri Sun and Kool Aid drink pouches, Oreo cookie wrappers, Lays Potato Chip bags, and Clif Energy Bar wrappers all earn 2 cents each. If this sounds like a fun little PTA project, think again. TerraCycle Brigades have a membership of over 8 million people, collecting 19 different products that are currently turned into 106 different up-cycled products. Drink pouches become pencil cases, lunch boxes, tote bags and homework folders; cookie wrappers become backpacks, messenger bags and even a kite. Over half the products are currently available at major retailers like Walmart, Target, The Home Depot, OfficeMax, Petco, and Whole Foods Market.

Founded in 2001 by a 19-year-old Princeton University Freshman named Tom Szaky (pronounced 'zackie'), TerraCycle's first product was an organic fertilizer created from 'worm poop'. Manufacturing that worm poop required business practices that have become part of the TerraCycle lore – raising \$20,000 to build a worm 'gin' where tons of waste could be delivered to worms who would devour the waste and produce their own body weight in casings (poop) every 24 hours; and having to retrieve food waste bins from Princeton's dining halls after they had been sitting in the summer heat for days and were full of maggots – all to produce an organic fertilizer that was more effective, more environmentally conscious and, more importantly for a new business venture, cheaper than the leading competitors' product, MiracleGro.

The worm poop fertilizer gave way to a worm poop 'tea' (allowing the company to buy worm poop from someone else) that could be sprayed on plants. With no money in the bank, packaging the 'tea' required bottles and sprayers, and this was the turning point for TerraCycle. Using recycled soda bottles (initially retrieved from dumpsters and recycling bins before it was pointed out to Szaky that this was illegal), donated waste sprayer tops from bottle manufacturers, and shipped in donated misprinted boxes from packaging companies, the future path of the company was set.

The company has grown into a "detritivore" that diverts non-recyclable waste away from the landfills into a profitable second retail life while teaching children about environmental awareness through their Terracycle Brigades. For Szaky, the journey is just beginning: "...for me, the goal isn't growth for growth's sake, but rather to reduce – or even eliminate – the very substance on which our business is based: waste."

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Sources:

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