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Nine in Ten Adults Recycle, but Only Half Do So Daily

Despite Understanding the Benefits of Recycling, Many Are Confused about What Can Be Recycled

New York, NY – Nine in ten adults (87%) report that they recycle, though only half of adults (51%) recycle every day, according to a national survey of over 1,000 U.S. adults conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Yesterday's News. Roughly a third (36%) tend to recycle less frequently, while 13% admit that they *never* recycle.

- Those most likely to recycle on a daily basis are college graduates (59%), adults aged 55 and older (57%), residents of the Northeast (58%) and West (56%).
- Cat owners are more likely than those without a cat at home to say that they recycle in general (91% vs. 85%).

Benefits of Recycling

U.S. adults do see a wide variety of benefits of recycling, particularly that it helps to reduce landfills (81%), saves trees (69%), and conserves energy (62%). Many also believe that recycling has economic benefits, such as creating jobs (45%) and making money (33%). Very few are unsure of the benefits (3%) or do not see any of these as advantages.

Barriers to Recycling

Though many acknowledge the many benefits of recycling, adults cite a variety of barriers that prevent them from recycling more, with the top reason being that it is not accessible or convenient to where they live (25%). Others report that it is too time consuming (10%), that they just forget (10%), that they aren't sure what is recyclable and what isn't (8%), or the cost (6%). Very few report that ideological concerns prevent them from recycling more often, such as feeling their efforts wouldn't make a difference (3%), not thinking it's important (2%), or not understanding the environmental benefit (1%). At the same time, a majority (52%) reports that none of these barriers prevent them from recycling.

Recycling Habits

Nearly three quarters (72%) report that they recycle to most at home, either through curbside recycling (46%) or by taking their recyclables to a local recycling center (26%). Just 6% say that they recycle most at work, though this proportion jumps to 11% among full-time workers. One in ten (10%) say that they recycle elsewhere and 12% report that they do not recycle at all.

The most commonly recycled items include plastics, such as water bottles and packaging (69%); metals, such as soda cans and soup cans (64%); newspapers (56%); other paper products such as cardboard boxes, magazines, junk mail, etc. (56%); and glass, such as jars and juice bottles (49%). Fewer report that they most recycle electronics, such as CDs or old computer parts (14%) or other items (4%).

- Older adults, college graduates, and residents of the Northeast – those who also tend to recycle most frequently, are also more likely to recycle a wider variety of items, particularly glass, newspapers, and other paper products.



Recycling IQ

While majorities say that they recycle plastics, metal and paper products, there does seem to be some confusion about which items can be recycled and which cannot. While majorities understand that cell phones (78%) and motor oil (67%) can be recycled, many are unaware that other, less typical items can also be recycled, such as trophies (36%) and crayons (36%). Conversely, many may be trying to recycle items that are not actually recyclable, such as pizza boxes (77%) and juice boxes (73%). Waxed paper and cardboard that is contaminated by food cannot be recycled.

Similarly, many adults are unconscious of the fact that certain household items are often made from recycled paper. A third (34%) report that they would be most surprised to learn that cat litter can be made from recycled paper, followed by greeting cards (8%), egg cartons (6%), and phone books (5%). However, nearly half (48%) say that they would not be surprised to learn that any of these items are made from recycled materials.

- Adults under 35 (42%) and residents of the West (41%) are most likely to be surprised that cat litter can be made from recycled paper. However, there is very little difference between cat owners and those without a cat at home (33% vs. 35%).

When unsure as to whether an item is recyclable, half of adults (50%) say that they are most likely to just throw the item away. Roughly one in six (18%) say that they would put it into the recycling bin anyway. Just a quarter (26%) report that they would look it up before deciding whether to throw it in the trash or the recycling bin.

Perhaps some of these misperceptions about what can be recycled and what can't stems from a lack of information. Nearly half (47%) say that they haven't learned anything about recycling in over six months and 12% report that they have *never* learned anything about recycling. At the same time, so are exposed to this information more regularly, with 13% reporting that they are flooded with information about recycling and an additional 29% saying that they learned something about recycling in the month.

- However, as noted above, less than one in ten (8%) cite a lack of understanding about what can be recycled as a barrier to recycling more. However, this is a more common problem among adults under 35 (15%) and college graduates (13%).

These are some of the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted May 2-5, 2011. For the survey, a national sample of 1,004 adults aged 18 and older from Ipsos' U.S. online panel were interviewed online. Weighting was employed to balance demographics and ensure that the sample's composition reflects that of the universe. A survey with an unweighted probability sample of this size and a 100% response rate would have an estimated margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20 of what the results would have been if the entire population adults aged 18 and older in the United States had been polled. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error.

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