What Americans Looked to Recycle In 2008

A Report By:

Making Every Day Earth Day™

Table of Contents

I. Overview of Recycling:

In 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set a goal of 20 million pounds of waste diverted from landfills. One of the suggested ways to accomplish this is through recycling, as the United States currently recycles 32 percent of its waste but it's estimated that as much as 75 percent of waste is recyclable.

Recycling has several environmental benefits, including:

1. Reducing the amount of waste in landfills, which are so tightly compacted that landfilled products take much longer to decompose and the waste piles up
2. Providing recycled materials to be used in the production of new products, which can significantly reduce energy use over creating products from virgin materials
3. Keeping heavy metals such as lead and mercury (which are present in products including electronics, light bulbs and paint) out of landfills, where they can leach into soil and groundwater

It is important to keep in mind that there is currently no federal standard for recycling, meaning materials accepted and collection methods are decided by states and individual communities. Several states have passed laws designed to increase recycling (such as bottle deposit laws, electronic waste landfill bans), but recycling is largely based on voluntary participation.

II. Overview of Earth911.com:

Earth911.com delivers actionable local information on recycling and product stewardship that empowers consumers to act locally, live responsibly and contribute to sustainability.

Since 1991, people have been using Earth911.com and the 1-800-CLEANUP toll-free hotline to find local recycling solutions. This information is provided at no cost to the user or taxpayer, and without political bias or commercial endorsement. These resources also serve as the call to action on billions of consumer products to find convenient recycling and disposal options.

Earth911.com compliments this data with content on why recycling is important, recycling best practices, how different materials are recycled and the different types of products made from recycled content.

Because Earth911.com maintains the only national database of recycling solutions for over 170 different products, its data can be used to evaluate both national and region-specific trends in the recycling industry.

The purpose of this report is to showcase the different types of products Americans looked to recycle in 2008. It will paint a picture of where recycling demand is currently based on the needs of American consumers.

III. Sources of Earth911.com Data:

Before we determine what people are searching for, it is important to point out what information they are searching. Earth911.com's listings are gathered from the following four sources:

1. **Recycling Officials** – Each state and community has staff dedicated to planning and overseeing recycling initiatives. These coordinators use the Manage Earth911 Administrative Tool to add, update and remove local information on a daily basis. Many communities use Earth911.com's recycling information in place of providing this information on their sites.
2. **Private Sector Submissions** – Recycling is a business, meaning there are thousands of organizations that offer either drop-off or pick-up recycling (or both) to sell the collected materials. In addition, many national retailers provide recycling as a way of increasing foot traffic and showing an environmental commitment. Earth911.com works with both these groups to promote non-governmental recycling solutions.
3. **Site Submissions** – Any Earth911.com user can suggest a listing that is not already in the search database. The information is then verified by staff and included in the search results.
4. **Internal Call Center** – Daily search data is tracked so Earth911.com staff can identify gaps in the data set and target geographic areas/products in need of recycling information. This is followed by outbound calls and research to address the missing information.

All of this data is presented in one of three formats:

1. **Locations** – A location is a physical address where a consumer or business can drop off a product for recycling/proper disposal. It can be a community-run site, a retail location, a recycling business or even a 24-hour drop-off bin in a parking lot.
2. **Programs** – A program involves a consumer or business opting in to a recycling service. It can be a curbside service or a community-run service to collect household hazardous waste (HHW), a recycling business that offers pick-up recycling/proper disposal or a mail-in/mail-back program.
3. **Events** – An event is a one-time option for recycling/proper disposal. Events can be put on by communities or recycling businesses, and can be tied-in with a holiday (such as Earth Day or America Recycles Day). Sometimes a recycling location will offer events during the year to provide expanded hours and extra opportunity for people to recycle.

IV. The Year 2008 in Recycling

What often occurs with recycling is that consumers respond to local laws and press coverage with increased knowledge and awareness. In 2008, these developments included:

- The passage of laws banning electronics from landfills, including large states like Oregon and Texas and the largest city in the United States, New York, N.Y.
- Communities recognizing the impact of plastic bags in landfills by implementing plastic bag take back programs for grocers and retail stores; these cities included New York, N.Y.; Phoenix, Ari. and San Francisco, Cali.
- A push for energy-efficiency and the installation of compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs), which many states mandate recycling for because CFLs contain mercury
- Mainstream media coverage about the health effects of improperly disposed electronics by *National Geographic* and *60 Minutes*
- Research released about the presence of Bisphenol-A (and other additives with hazardous health effects) in many plastics that caused consumers to rethink the plastic products in their lives
- An Associated Press investigation into the presence of pharmaceuticals in drinking water, the result of medications being flushed, and actions by states including California to prevent the improper disposal of medical waste
- An economic downturn resulting in historically low numbers for the resale of recycled materials, putting a freeze on some community recycling programs that required consumers to seek alternative disposal solutions
- Increasing attention being paid to the digital switch in February 2009 and the solutions for televisions without digital tuners

These national and regional stories got millions of Americans to ask one question: "So what do I do with this product now?" Earth911.com was the recommended resource on much of the coverage of these stories, and partnered with both states and manufacturers to inform consumers of the no-charge recycling/proper disposal search engine.

As a result, it's no surprise that search demand increased for products including electronics, plastics and fluorescent bulbs in 2008.

V. Search Statistics from Earth911.com

For the year 2008, Earth911.com averaged over 6,000 recycling searches per day. The following is a list of the 10 most commonly searched terms for the year:

1. Batteries
2. Motor Oil
3. Computers
4. Fluorescent Bulbs (including CFLs)
5. Paint
6. Televisions
7. Plastic
8. Aluminum Cans
9. Christmas Trees
10. Electronics

Because "recycling" is typically associated with what can be accepted at the curb, it's worth noting that seven of these products are not part of curbside programs (and an additional one is a seasonal offering).

This shows that not only are consumers expanding their knowledge of what can be recycled, but there is enough access for the more commonly known and disposed recyclables (paper, metal, glass, etc.) that these recycling solutions are not as sought after.

The use of top-level categories (e.g. batteries, plastic, electronics) indicates that recycling is often thought of in general terms instead of specific products. In reality, both battery and plastic recycling options will depend on the individual product a consumer has, which shows the value of complimenting recycling data with product-specific content to educate.

VI. Content Statistics from Earth911.com

As part of a change in site organization in 2008, Earth911.com brought product-specific content to the forefront to put a face on the different kinds of products that don't belong in landfills. The following is a list of the 10 most commonly searched product pages for the year:

1. Computers
2. Aluminum Cans
3. Single-Use Batteries
4. Plastic Bottles
5. Motor Oil
6. Magazines
7. Plastic Bags
8. Paint
9. Computer Monitors
10. Light Bulbs

Seven of the 10 terms in this list are consistent with the previous one (nine if you count both plastic bags and bottles as "plastic" and assume people wish to recycle a computer and monitor together). The interesting difference though is the change in order.

Products that are typically associated with curbside (i.e. aluminum cans and plastic bottles) rank much higher on the content search list. Even though consumers have more access to recycling solutions for these products, they still want to know why they should be recycled and learn more about the process.

VII. Search Statistics Broken Down By Region

It's already been pointed out that recycling is not managed on a national level. So while finding what products are in hot demand throughout the country is relevant information, it might make more sense to break things down further.

The EPA breaks down the U.S. into 10 regions based on geographic location and population. The states within these regions work together on all environmental issues, including waste management. Here's the five most commonly searched terms from each region in 2008.

Region 1: New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont)

1. Computers
2. Batteries
3. Motor Oil
4. Paint
5. Television

Region 1 represented approximately 5.0 percent of the total audience.

Region 2: New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

1. Computers
2. Batteries
3. Paint
4. Television
5. Motor Oil

Region 2 represented approximately 4.9 percent of the total audience.

Region 3: Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia)

1. Batteries
2. Computers
3. Motor Oil
4. Paint
5. Fluorescent Bulbs

Region 3 represented approximately 10.6 percent of the total audience.

Region 4: Southeast (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and 6 tribes)

1. Batteries
2. Motor Oil
3. Computers
4. Plastic
5. Television

Region 4 represented approximately 15.5 percent of the total search data.

Region 5: Great Lakes (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin and 35 tribes)

1. Computers
2. Batteries
3. Motor Oil
4. Paint
5. Fluorescent Bulbs

Region 5 represented approximately 17.5 percent of the total search data.

Region 6: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and 65 tribes

1. Plastic
2. Motor Oil
3. Paint
4. Batteries
5. Aluminum Cans

Region 6 represented approximately 10.2 percent of the total search data.

Region 7: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and 9 tribes

1. Batteries
2. Fluorescent Bulbs
3. Motor Oil
4. Paint
5. Computers

Region 7 represented approximately 4.5 percent of the search data.

Region 8: Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming and 35 tribes

1. Batteries
2. Plastic
3. Computers
4. Motor Oil
5. Paint

Region 8 represented approximately 3.4 percent of the total search data.

Region 9: Pacific Southwest (Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Pacific Islands and over 140 tribes)

1. Batteries
2. Paint
3. Fluorescent Bulbs
4. Computers
5. Aluminum Cans

Region 9 represented approximately 17.3 percent of the total search data.

Region 10: Pacific Northwest (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and native tribes)

1. Television
2. Computers
3. Batteries
4. Fluorescent Bulbs
5. Motor Oil

Region 10 represented approximately 3.0 percent of the total search data.

It seems that no matter which part of the United States we focus on, recycling demand is focused on the same key set of terms. Only eight terms made the top five out of a possible 50 (if all 10 regions had five unique terms), and expanding the search to individual states would only add one additional product (medication in California).

Another interesting finding from this regional analysis is the audience breakdown. In a perfect world, all 10 regions would provide 10 percent of the search data to show balance of recycling interest. However, half of the regions came in at five percent or less, and the three “Southern” regions combined for 43 percent of this year’s recycling searches.

VIII. Recycling Prospects for the Future

The fact that consumers are commonly searching for recycling solutions for some of the most environmentally-unfriendly products is a promising sign that legislation and media coverage has been successful. So what product will be the next CFL, coming out of nowhere to present a consumer disposal conundrum?

While it's impossible to predict the future, here are a few possibilities:

- **Medication** – In California, one of the more progressive states when it comes to recycling, "medication" was the most popular search term in 2008. This was the only real outlier of all 50 states, so is this a one-state concern or an example of California setting a trend for the rest of the United States to follow?

- **Non-Traditional Plastics** – Most curbside recycling programs now accept plastic bottles and jugs, which go by the scientific names of polyethylene terephthalate (PET, or Plastic #1) and high-density polyethylene (HDPE, or Plastic #2). But there are seven different resins of plastic, including polystyrene (Plastic #6, which includes Styrofoam) and bio-plastics made of corn (part of the Plastic #7 Other category).

  In 2008, while Plastic #1 and #2 ranked just outside the top 10 both nationally and in many regions, polystyrene and polypropylene (Plastic #5) ranked in the second tier of results. These terms may not be a household name yet, but it shows consumers are starting to check the bottom of their plastics for recycling purposes. Already, cities like Phoenix, Ariz. are responding by accepting all forms of plastic in curbside programs.

- **Composting** – Composting is in no way a new phenomenon, but it is one area of recycling that requires no third party participation. Earth911.com also provides articles on green living, and the most popular article for 2008 was how to compost with worms. As "pay as you throw" trash collection gains in popularity (where residents pay based on how much trash is accumulated), waste reduction steps such as composting will likely be the recommended solution.