



RECYCLING RIGHT

- MOTIVATING FLUCTUATORS AND FOLLOWERS





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Background



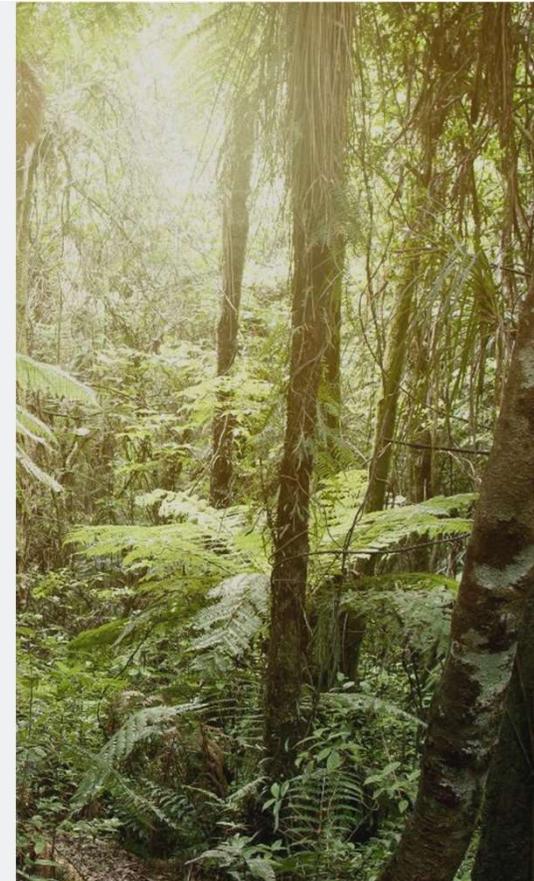
In 2020, the WasteMINZ Team commissioned a project with Colmar Brunton, called 'Rethinking rubbish and recycling', focussed on understanding and quantifying New Zealanders knowledge and attitudes towards recycling in their homes.



This research revealed five distinct audience segments, who have different knowledge, attitudes, motivations and behaviours when it comes to recycling. The biggest influence on their commitment to recycle properly was revealed to be the belief that it is worth taking the time to do so. The second biggest influence is finding recycling easy to do.



WasteMINZ are planning a national campaign to build compliance and social value in the recycling system. More research is needed to help inform the strategy and focus for this campaign.



Objectives



There are a range of primary and secondary objectives and areas of interest that this research explored.

The primary objectives are to:

- Better understand the motivations and barriers of fluctuators and followers to take the time to recycle right
- Clearly understand the common 'myths' of recycling, the sources they come from and the weight given when recycling right or not
- Understand the mindset of wish-cycling with fluctuators
- Understand opportunities to build social value and transparency of the recycling system to dispel common 'myths'

Additional objectives include:

- How to build social license for recycling i.e. what are the motivations of fluctuators in general: Is it family, finances, emotional?
- Understand what has the biggest impact on their beliefs re: deliverer of message and/or channel – helping us consider optimal channels of engagement for this audience
- What are the dynamics in a fluctuator's or follower's household that undermines efforts to recycle right? I.e. time, ease



What we did



We undertook a two day online forum (“Qualboard”), with a video pre task around recycling and an email follow up five days after their attendance.



The forum comprised 24 respondents, 19 of whom were recontacted from the 2020 survey. An additional 5 respondents were freshly recruited.



All respondents were either ‘fluctuators’ (the majority of our respondents) or ‘followers’, and represented a spread of household types, locations, genders and ages.



In the forum we posed respondents questions (eg exploring attitudes), got them to respond to stimulus (eg myths) and answered polls (what’s most important to them).



Introduction and context



An introduction to our audience



- We engaged a people from many walks of life and many different households. They were all chosen for being 'fluctuators' or 'followers', indicating that they were neither recycling rejectors or nor evangelists and are averagely committed to recycling. People within these groups tend to have positive attitudes, but their behaviour can fluctuate depending on circumstances.
- All respondents were generally committed to recycling, though clearly some were more diligent than others. We asked each of them to make a video snapshot of their household recycling. Here is a selection of some of the most 'fluctuator' type video responses.



Charle



Shynam



Cath L

Context: The perception of recycling vs other household tasks



- As part of setting the context for our discussions, we asked respondents to choose their most liked and disliked household tasks.
- Sorting and recycling waste is neither the most loved or hated task. But the reason people gave for their choices is revealing.
- Liked household tasks bring a strong degree of **instant satisfaction and results**: the enjoyment of a meal, the visual completion of laundry. They are also felt to be **pretty easy or straightforward**.
- Disliked household tasks are **pointless, fiddly** and often encounter **dirt**: endless dusting, thankless washing of dishes.

MOST LIKED	
Cooking meals	2.4
Doing laundry	2.8
Sorting waste and recycling	3.2
Sweeping / Vacuuming	3.5
Washing dishes	3.9
Dusting	5.3
MOST DISLIKED	



Context: Why the task of recycling feels good and bad



- The themes that we encountered with household tasks in general were reflected when we asked people to reflect upon what they do and do not like about recycling.
- They liked the **satisfaction** of the recycling outcome (the 'environmental glow' of thinking their items will be used again). There was also more instant satisfactions for some – the satisfaction of orderly organisation, the satisfaction of squishing cans and cardboard or the contentment of a full bin.
- What they disliked about recycling was primarily the **mental load required** for a menial task – recycling is **confusing** for many. People also mentioned the **encounters with dirt and smells** as another thing that put them off.
- Evidence suggests* that enjoyment and interest in a task is correlated with how well that task is done.
- Perhaps the question we should be asking of ourselves is not simply 'how can we make recycling more motivating', but how can we make recycling more akin to the satisfaction of cooking or doing the laundry?

Dirty bottles, for example the dregs of beer left in the bottle spilling on you. But I do enjoy the satisfying feeling or sorting it in the categories, eg: cardboard, plastic, coloured bottles. I also enjoy the feeling knowing I am helping the environment and not just throwing it in the bin.

Kate M

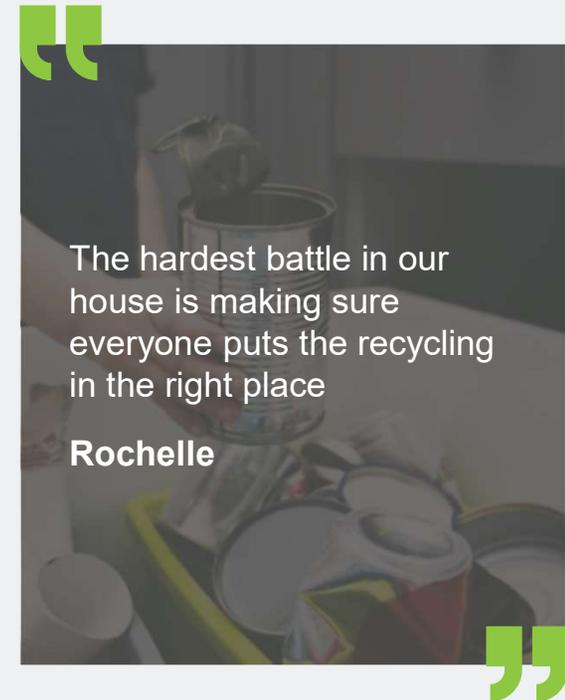
At the most basic level, for recycling to be done well, we need to increase the satisfaction and decrease the dissatisfaction around recycling.

* Are interest and enjoyment important for students' performance? Stanislaw Schukajlow, André Krug

Context: A shared outcome, achieved (or undermined) individually



- One of the challenges of recycling is that outcomes are achieved at a household level but contributed to at an individual level.
- Many respondents talked of the frustrations of getting all members of their household to do the recycling well. These were often close family members – siblings, in laws and surprisingly often children, who seemed to have very established forms of behaviour.
- They mostly put this down to the fact that others do not place such a high level of importance on recycling and are sometimes ‘lazy’.
- All people recognised that their household could do better with recycling (though some did think they were pretty close).
- Universally, people did think it would be ‘awesome’ if everyone in their household got 10/10 for recycling. There was no sense that this would be ‘over the top’ so there is no indication of individuals not wanting to identify with being a perfect recycler.

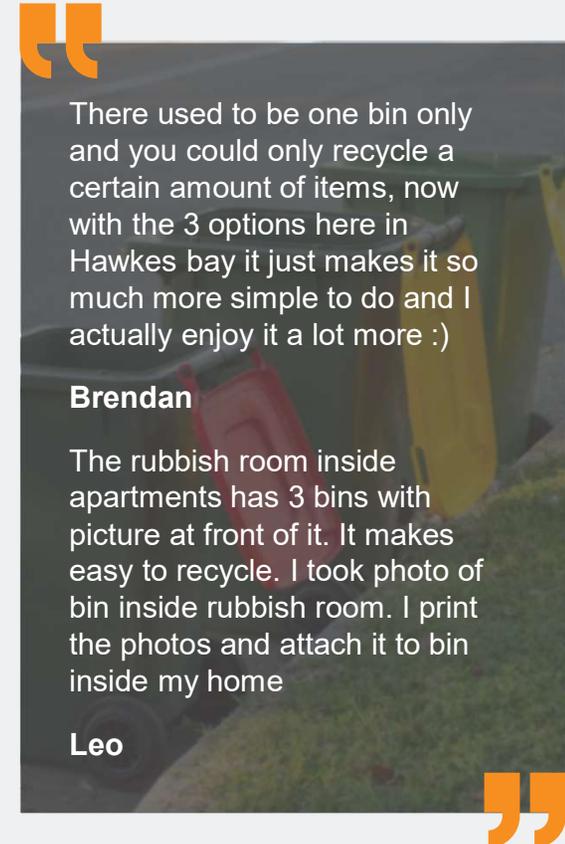


Strategies may need to recognise and address the individual dynamics of recycling within a household, potentially by increasing the agency of ‘lead recyclers’

Context: A simple task on a complex system



- The videos of respondents introducing us to how they did their recycling system revealed a **fascinating collection of systems and behaviours**.
- It is clear that quite a **lot of effort** has gone into the set up of these systems, which often spanned multiple **locations** (around and outside the home), multiple **stages** ('holding' areas and final destinations) and multiple **people** ('checkers' and kerbers).
- Many homes were not well suited to recycling – with 'nests' and 'stashes' of recycling tucked away behind doors, by the side of the fridge or left on bench tops. These homes seemed to have a **tolerance for visual clutter**.
- All households had some sort of recycling 'system', which seemed to have been developed over time. However, it was often by no means sure that everyone would use or respect 'our system'. Work arounds on work arounds were evident.
- Though this is a small sample, those that had more than one interim location for their recycling seemed to be more committed to recycling overall. Those that put all their recycling into the same place inside their house seemed to be more likely to be tempted to 'wish cycle'.
- **Written rules** seem to be very influential. With many people unsure of themselves, anything that was written down seemed to be accepted as the recycling 'truth'.

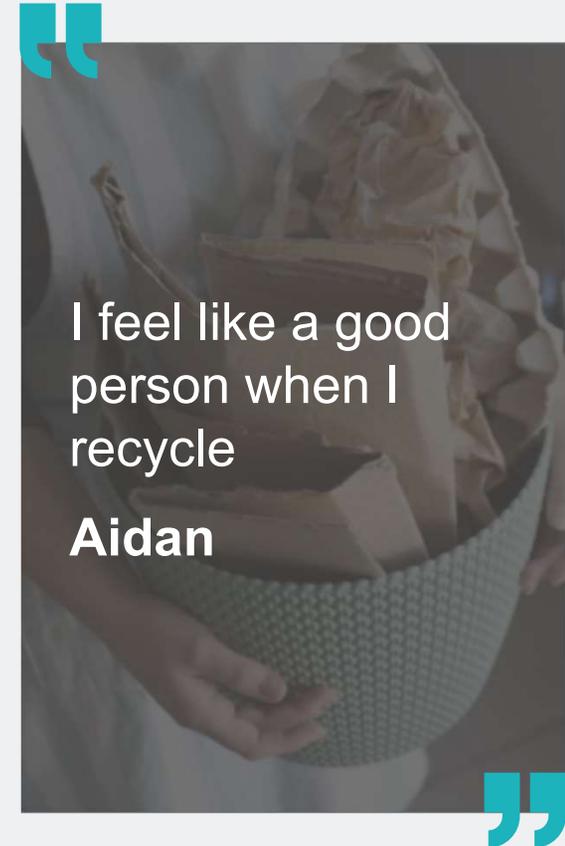


What motivates and gets in the way



What motivates this group to do recycling

- Universally, everyone (within this particular group*) believes that recycling is an important activity and should be done well.
- People talked of the **environmental benefits** of recycling – the sense of ‘doing your bit’ for the environment, and for **future generations**. People spoke of the more immediate need to ‘**cut down on waste**’ (particularly plastic waste). Some spoke of the practical and financial benefits of reducing the **need for and cost of landfill** (both at a household and local government level).
- Deep down, many people articulated a sense of **being a ‘good person’** when they recycle. They were careful not to identify with people who are ‘lazy’ or in denial about the need for recycling.
- This is key to their recycling psyche – even if they may not always do recycling well, they believe that their efforts of recycling mean they are good people. This maybe makes criticizing them difficult – they seem to want to be praised for doing the ‘right thing’ rather than chastised for not doing it well.



* Note that this group excluded other segments such as ‘deniers’ and ‘difficults’ who are more likely to reject the need to do recycling well.

Recycling makes waste useful



- More specifically, many people found satisfaction from the thought that their waste could have some form of second life. They were quite often unsure as to the details of how it was used again and in what form, but the idea of materials being used again brings with it a sense of satisfaction.
- Even though the word 'recyclable' points to this idea of waste being cycled around, it is interesting to note that 'recycling' and 'recyclable' are used in many different forms and context and maybe the word itself has lost some of the sense of the positive, useful outcome.
- Discussions centred around 'is it recyclable?' (rather than is this 'valuable'/'useful?') or 'doing the recycling' (as a activity or a chore, akin to putting the bins out).
- There is potentially an opportunity to bring additional language around 'recycling' beyond the word itself that more directly evokes the positive feel-good motivations that this group are looking for.
- For example, instead of 'doing the recycling' you are 'making waste useful'.



Mismatch values/ actions: intention action gap



- However, as has been known by behavioural scientists for a long time, we don't always do what we say, or do what we know... Our motivations and intentions do not always line up with our actions.
- This effect, known as the intention/action gap (or value/action gap) was evident in our research, and is also likely to be evident in real life.



For example, we saw...

Harshi, an environmental resource management graduate, saying *"when it comes to safe planet recycling our waste comes to number one!! It is a simple thing every one could do towards a sustainable planet!!"* ...whilst admitting to throwing stuff in the waste bin as she can't be bothered to wash it out.

Shynam, who vividly recalls watching Al Gore's: The Inconvenient Truth, but also says he's *'a bit lazy at recycling'*.

Charle, who has had *"someone come look at our bins before they get collected and he leaves notices for us, that make me change my behavior and rethink before I recycle"* but also videoed herself placing items in her recycling bin that she knew shouldn't be there.

The recycling intention/action gap



THE INTENTION

All respondents had a desire for their household to achieve 10/10 for their recycling



THE GAP

Includes:
Time
Confusion
Other people
Confidence
Practicalities
Etc...



THE ACTION

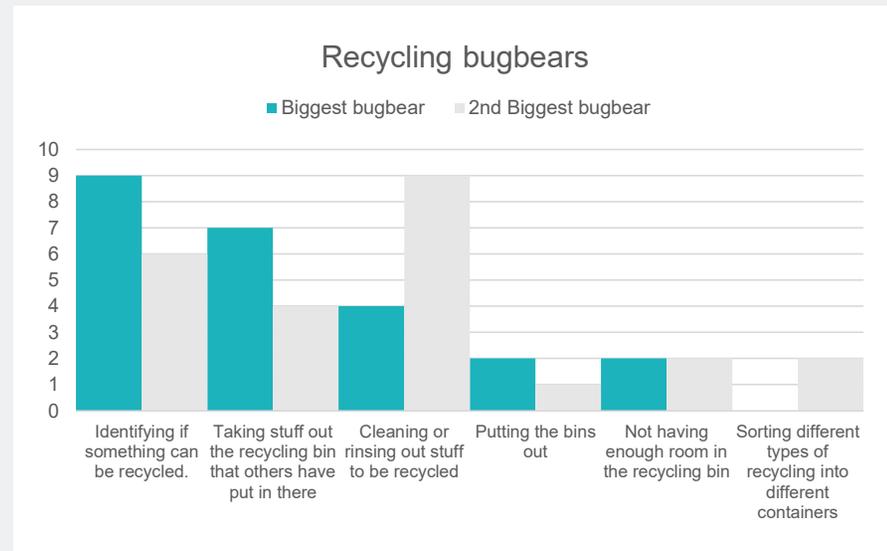
Respondents rated their actual recycling behaviours between 5 to 9 out of 10.



What gets in the way of recycling intentions following through into actions



- Identification of **whether or not an item can be recycled** was most frequently identified as the biggest bugbear around recycling.
- Knowing what can be recycled was often **'baffling'**, and not just difficult, but also low level stressful.
 - Some complained about not having their spectacles handy when inspecting packaging...
- As pointed out earlier, the **behaviours of other people** in the household was also a common bugbear – many people not liking taking stuff out of the recycling that other people had put there.
- Consistent with people's dislike of dirty household tasks, the **cleaning and rinsing required** by recycling was the second biggest bugbear for many. It just makes recycling more of a chore.
- Bugbears around the recycling system (not having enough room, sorting different types, putting the bins out) were at a much lower level. As indicated earlier, most people seem to have implemented a household recycling system that seems to be working for them.

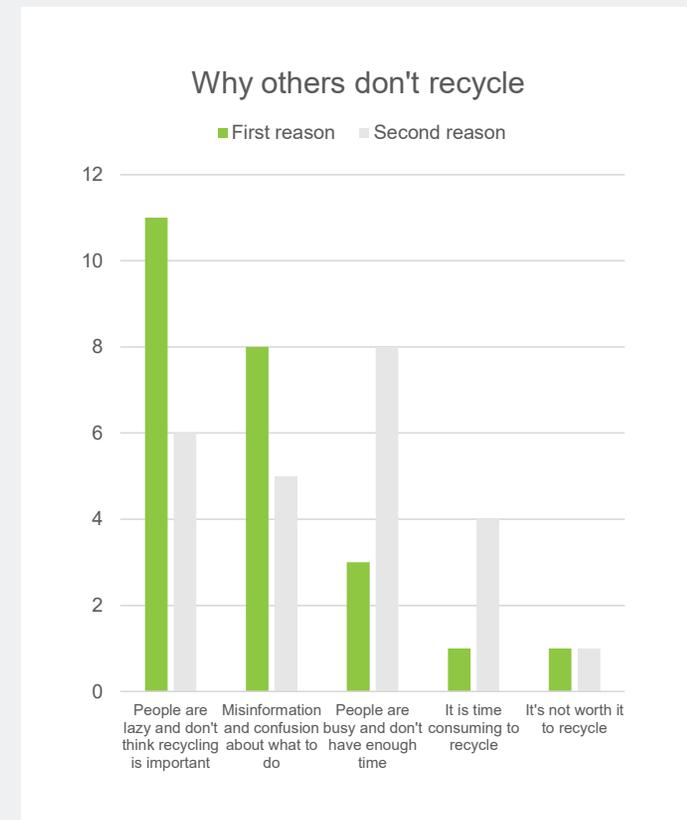


“ I never know what to do with plastics, like straws or soft plastic wrapping. Do I throw it in the trash or recycling!? Stresses me out
Aidan F ”

Why they think others don't recycle gives us another clue



- We also asked why they thought that other people did not recycle. This gives us a clue to what they also observe in their homes (and what they might also be tempted to do themselves).
- The reason they gave for why other people do not recycle was most frequently **'laziness' and lack of importance**. This judgement with what we observed about their beliefs that recycling is the act of a 'good person'.
- This reflects behavioural theory* - the tendency to blame another's personality for behaviours for which we excuse ourselves due to circumstance. In effect, 'I don't do recycling because I'm confused (etc), but others don't do recycling because they don't care'.
- They also reflected the **misinformation and confusion** that they felt (their number one bugbear) onto other people – many people also feeling that other people experienced this too.
- There is also a recognition at a slightly lower level that recycling takes up time, and therefore may not be done, particularly if people are busy.
- Notably, few people questioned whether other people felt it was worth it to recycle.



*Fundamental attribution error or correspondence bias.

The moment of wish cycling

- These themes came through in the moment of **'wish cycling'**.
- Many people claimed that this is when they 'look up' whether or something can be recycled (via google, council website).
- But some people also admitted to just making a decision either way.
- Those who put something they were unsure about into the recycling bin talked of their **'hope'** that it would be recycled. Some even talked about how something **'ought'** to be recycled – implying a sense of judgement that something should be able to be recycled, whether it is possible in practice or not.
- Many people had a sense or an expectation that something in the wrong bin will be picked out by someone further down the process.
- We also observed the inverse of 'wish' cycling, which might be termed **'won't cycling'**. This involved people throwing items that could be recycled into the trash because they either weren't sure it would not be recycled (but wouldn't look it up) or they couldn't be bothered to wash something out that they knew could be recycled.
- These little efforts are enough for people to put valuable materials into waste rather than into the recycling stream.





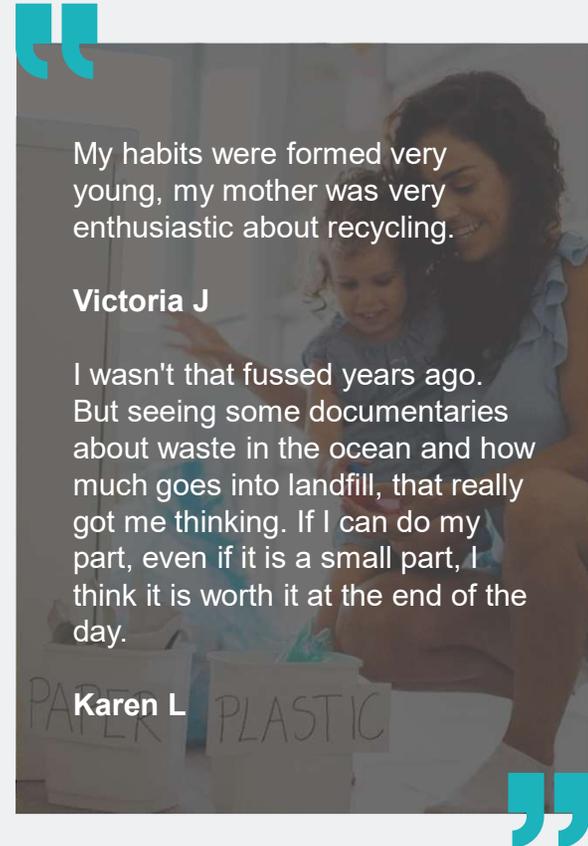
Knowledge and myths



How recycling habits are developed



- Many people spoke of their recycling attitudes (and by extension habits) being established over many years, often as a **result of their upbringing**.
- But it is important to note that habits are not static. Many people spoke of **modifying or renewing** their behaviours due to changing information or additional motivations.
- Some big **life events** (for example, moving country) also enabled people to reset their recycling habits.
- For Māori, recycling is seen as an important part of kaitiakitanga practices.
- Many people spoke not just of learning as **kids**, but learning from their kids. Children were often a vector to bring new recycling knowledge and enthusiasm into a household. Though some also acknowledge that their children were amongst the worst recycling offenders!
- **Landmark environmental programmes** (David Attenborough and such like) seem to create a sense of urgency and evaluation of recycling habits. New information (such as knowledge around greasy pizza boxes) seems to get people to fine tune their habits.
- Often this new information is gleaned from local sources – eg local newspapers, council website, or introduced by someone in the household.



My habits were formed very young, my mother was very enthusiastic about recycling.

Victoria J

I wasn't that fussed years ago. But seeing some documentaries about waste in the ocean and how much goes into landfill, that really got me thinking. If I can do my part, even if it is a small part, I think it is worth it at the end of the day.

Karen L

What people think happens to their recycling after collection

- Most people have a **fairly hazy idea** of what happens to their recycling after collection. Many people recognised that they should know more.
- This seems to be built up from a bit of guesswork, common sense and a small number of bits of information that they have come across.
- People consistently believe that there is some variety of '**recycling centre**' that has a role of diverting recycling from waste product (opinions differ on whether the recycling is actively sorted at the recycling centre). The waste product is dumped in landfill, and the recycled product is variously recycled, sent overseas or maybe also dumped in landfill.
- Most people believe that the local council oversee this process, though there is some confusion about the role of commercial business.
- A number of people had seen media stories around recycling being sent **overseas** (or no longer being sent overseas).
- The process by which **recyclable materials** are actually turned back into useful materials is even more sketchy. People were much more likely to name things they knew to be made out of recycled materials than have any knowledge of how this came to pass.



Goes to a recycling station where it is sorted. I think the councils each have their own individual process - but hire private companies? If the recycling is contaminated it will go to general waste. I think it is broken down/ melted down to new glass/plastic and then reused for other things e.g. playground flooring.

Bella L

It goes to Waste Management company, the bottles and glass goes back to their respective owners and some goes to make bio gas for their company trucks and cars.

Tony

Good question - I think it gets collected by the trucks and then taken and sorted at a recycling depot so they will put all the paper etc into different areas and then pull out things which can't be recycled. From there they will take it to places which can recycle it but to be honest I don't know too much about what happens and should know more!

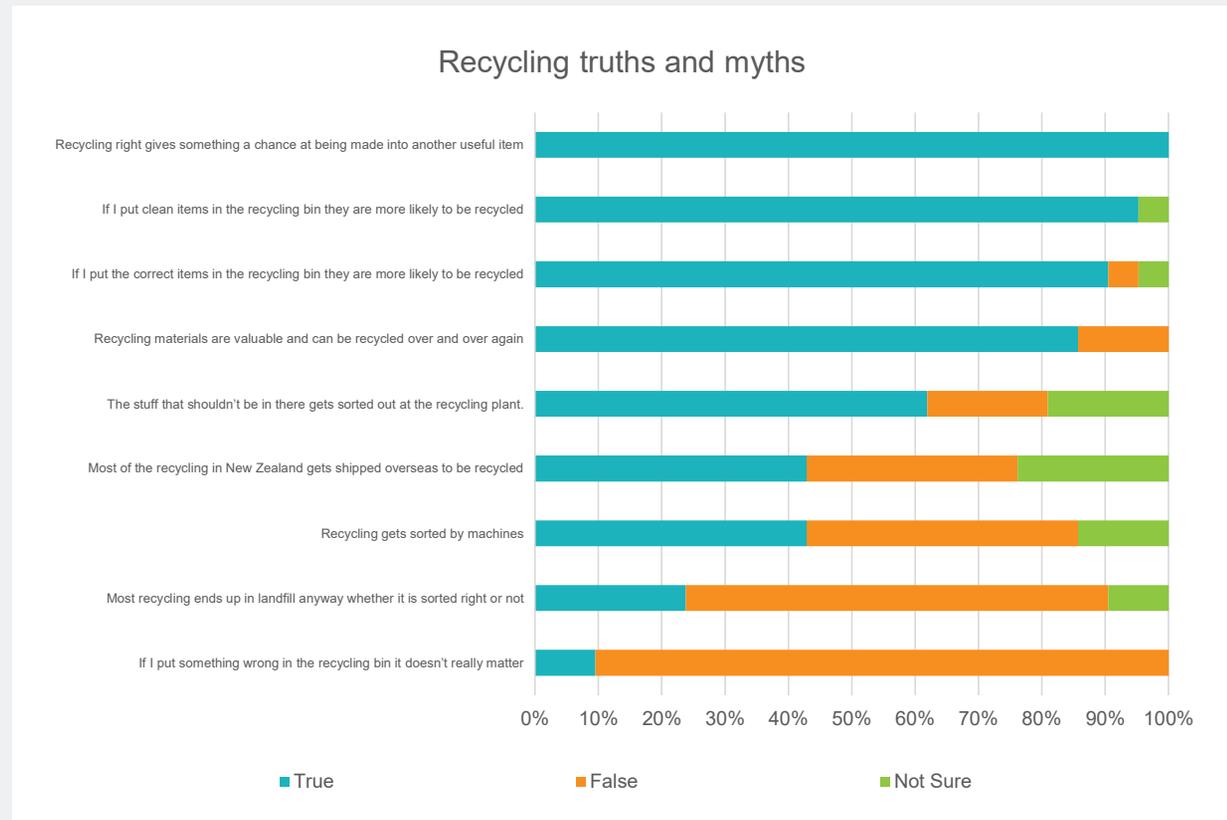
Cath L



The truths and myths of recycling



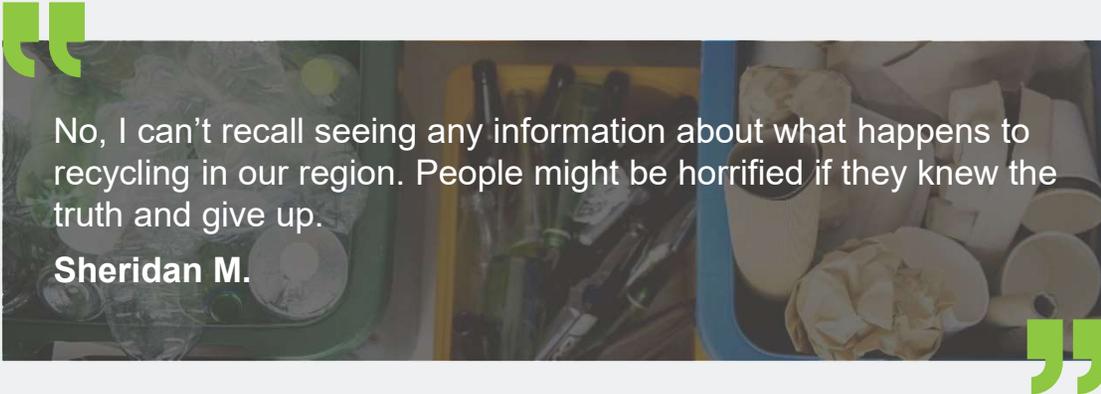
- We asked respondents to tell us whether a series of statements were true or false.
- Most of the statements that people felt to be true were those that alluded to the benefits of their recycling efforts – a greater chance of being recycled if recycling is done well.
- The parts that they were less sure about were those that related to **how recycling** is done – whether it is (re)sorted at the recycling plant (and if so, how), and **where** it is actually recycled (here or overseas).
- A minority of people (one in three) either believed, or were unsure, that most recycling **ends up in landfill** anyway.



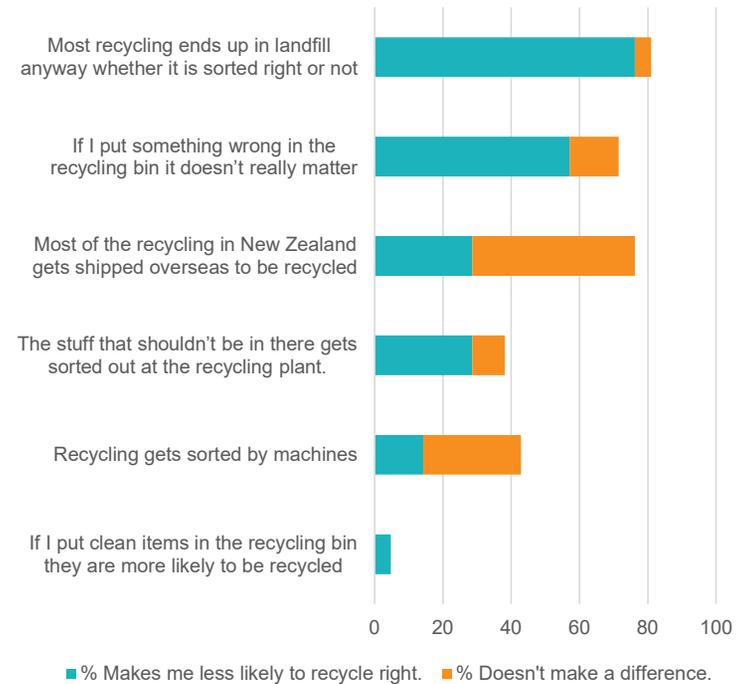
The impact of these 'myths'



- The potential impact of some of these myths is quite considerable if they are believed.
- Three quarters of people told us that they would be less likely to recycle right if they believed that most recycling ends up in landfill.
- Many people felt that they were less likely to recycle well if they felt it didn't matter if they put something wrong in the recycle bin.
- However, whether the recycling is done overseas doesn't seem to make a big difference to whether it is recycled well.



Impact of recycling truths and myths



The source of these ‘myths’

- Many people claimed to have first hand knowledge of these myths (particularly with regard to recycling going to landfill).
- This knowledge was sometimes from the past and other times more current.
- It subtly undermines faith in the recycling system and the effort of recycling.
- This ‘fact’ was frequently connected to being less careful or less committed to recycling behaviours.



I also learnt some from school when I wanted to implement a recycling system at my school, but was told that majority of the recycling in our small town was sent to the landfill in anyways. This has made me less careful about recycling.

Aidan F

Some of my friends think it just goes to landfill with household rubbish so that's why they don't bother recycling.

Brendan

No idea where it goes, someone told me it just goes to landfill.

Brock

I heard a horrific story a few years ago about a teacher who decided to take a few of her young class to follow a recycling truck to see what happens. To all their dismay, after collection, the truck went straight to landfill.

Jill B.

We have friend who were in the recycling business, so we do know that a lot of what we think is recycled actually goes to landfill because it is cheaper for the trucks to dump it than sort it. This makes us quite sad and not so careful at times.

Sheridan



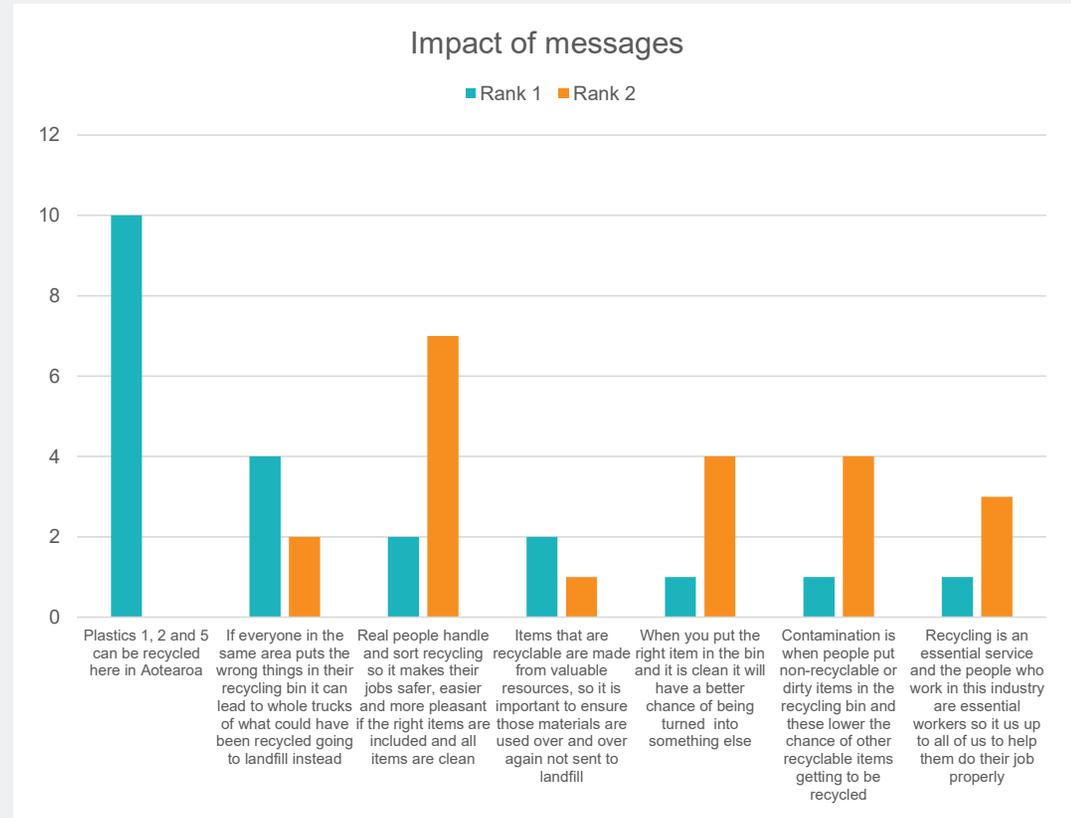
Nudging their behaviour



What messages influence



- We asked our respondents to rank a selection of messages for which they thought are most likely to encourage people to recycle right.
- By far the most commonly first ranked message was the **simple statement** that “Plastics 1, 2 and 5 can be recycled here in Aotearoa”. This clearly links to their number one bugbear of identifying what can be recycled (and their particular sensitivity to plastic).
- The thought of **‘whole trucks’** of recycling being wasted is also influential, and probably points to some of the unknowns they have around the recycling process.
- Frequently picked as a second choice is the fact that **‘real people’** handle recycling is also felt to be influential. This empathetic people-led approach was much more successful than the more practical people-led message suggested by the ‘essential workers’ statement.



What messages influence



When we asked them to explain their response in more detail, their replies grouped around three main themes:



“Help me know what to do”



“Make me feel my efforts are useful”



“Open my eyes to the role of others”

I personally struggle a lot with understanding which plastics can be recycled, which often leads me to throwing it in the trash

Aidan F

If everyone does their part in sorting out the correct items to be put in the recycling bin, then everyone else's effort would be useful.

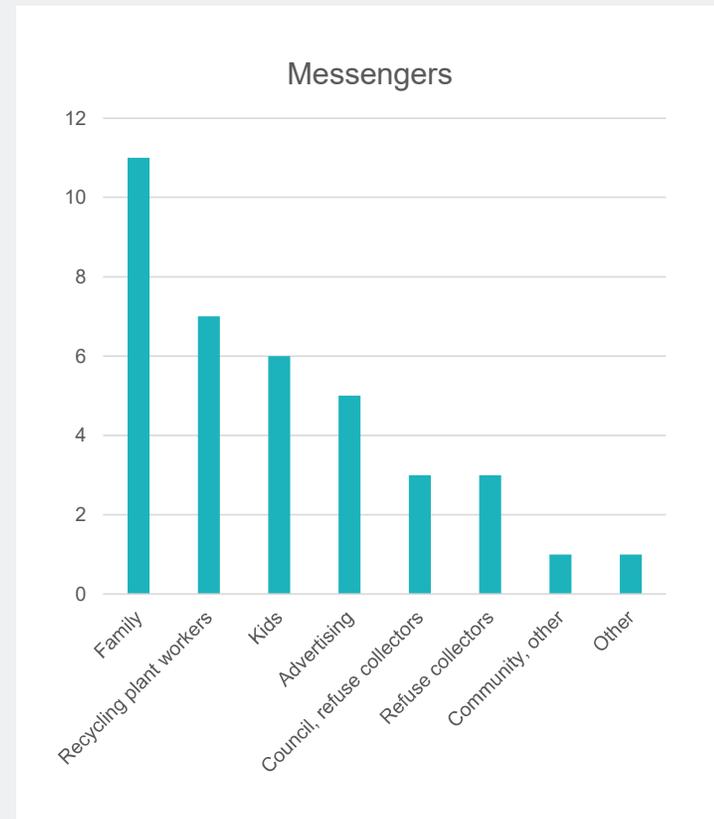
Karen L.

I think if more people were aware of the job factor of recycling and the people behind it they'd care a little more.

Victoria J.

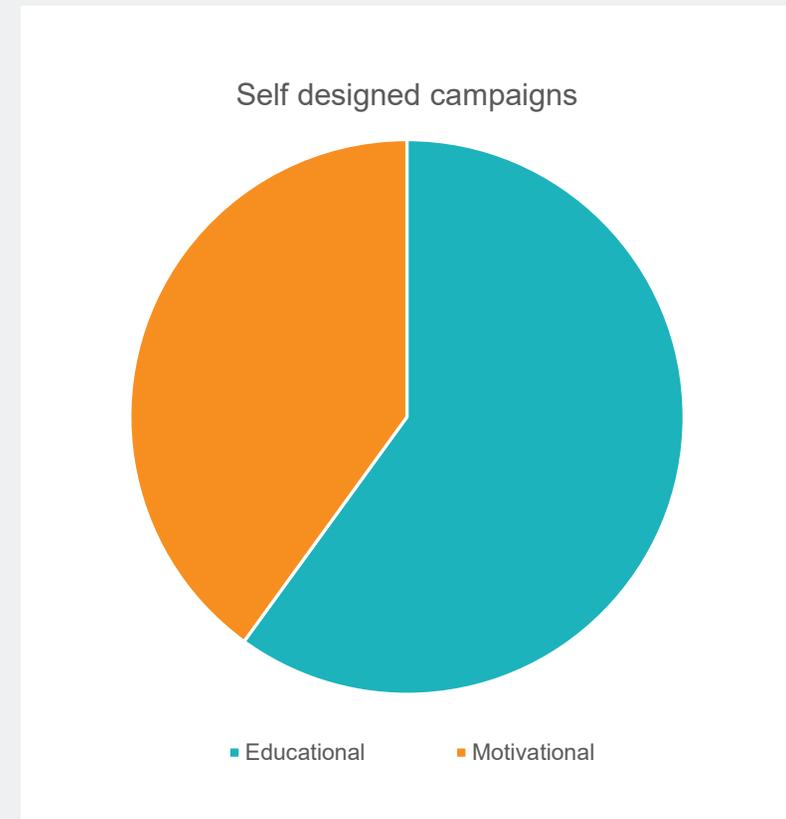
Who they listen to

- Consistent with their accounts of how they developed their recycling habits, it is clear that **other people in their own home** are a key source of influence.
- **Family members, including kids**, are often the first mention for who they would listen to.
- Strikingly (and possibly following on from the influential messages around processes involving real people), **recycling plant workers** in second place as the group that they would listen to. This group 'makes it real' and is seen to have a potential role in educating people how to do recycling better.



What they wanted in their campaign

- We asked our respondents to design a campaign to encourage effective recycling in their neighbourhood.
- The responses split into two groups – those that envisage an educational campaign (**how to recycle right**) and those who envisaged a motivational campaign (**why they should recycle right**).
- Those that described a motivational campaign reflected many of the motivations that they had expressed as to why they do recycling – particularly a focus on the future. This seems to be somewhat reflecting the belief **that other people don't think recycling is important** enough to do well (the 'laziness and lack of importance of recycling as described on page 19).
- There was no particular skew with regards to how they would encounter the campaign – some chose very local channels (leaflets, community meetings), whilst some identified mass media (TV and social).



Educational and motivational key messages in their own words:



Educational: how we do recycling



It could start with an informative flyer in people's letterboxes with some do's and don'ts about what to and how to recycle. I think that someone who works at the recycling plant would be most believed, and also seem real. **Sheridan M.**

My main idea would be to convey the message of how to use the recycling bin properly. **Harshi**

It would include facts about recycling to clarify any misinformation. It needs to be short and simple because people have short attention spans. **Casey**

I envision an advertisement where the whole family will be doing the recycling, kids will be running around finding things to recycle. **Emey G.**



Motivational: why we do recycling



Recycling to become a way of life. The spokesperson would be from children.

Karen P.

The main idea/message will be to bring forth a cleaner and less polluted environment for everyone, and the future. **Karen L.**

Importance of recycling for future generations. Steps to recycling easily. **Leo**

Take a leaf from the anti Covid campaign! Stress that our whole team of 5 million need to take part to slow the degradation of our surroundings

Jill B.



The danger with these motivational messages is that they speak to what they believe others to need, rather than their own challenges.

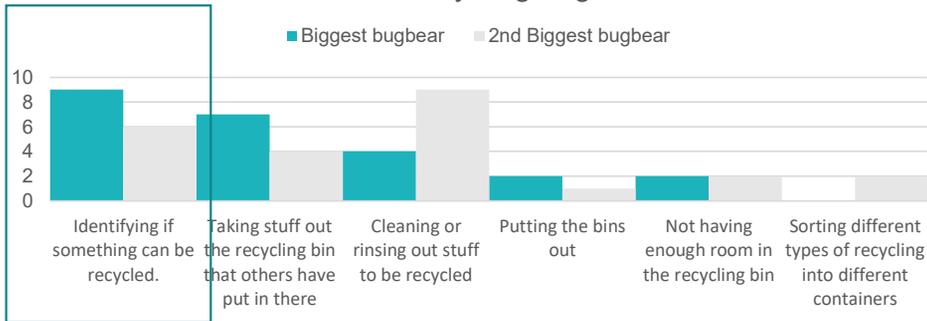


Educational – what they want

It could start with an informative flyer in people's letterboxes with some do's and don'ts about what to and how to recycle. I think that someone who works at the recycling plant would be most believed, and also seem real. **Sheridan M.**



Personal recycling bugbears

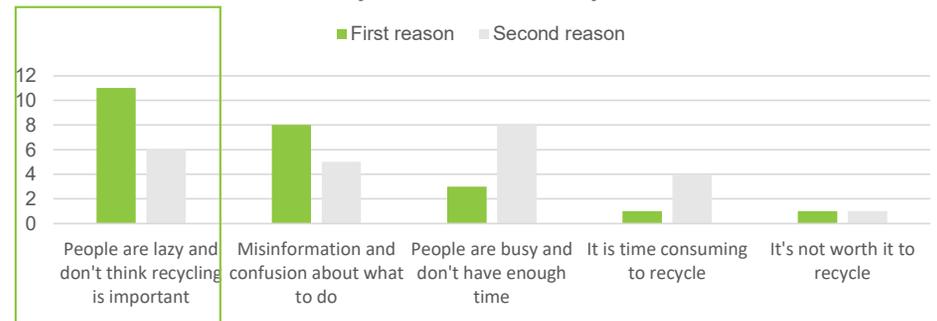


Motivational – want others need

Importance of recycling for future generations. Steps to recycling easily. **Leo**



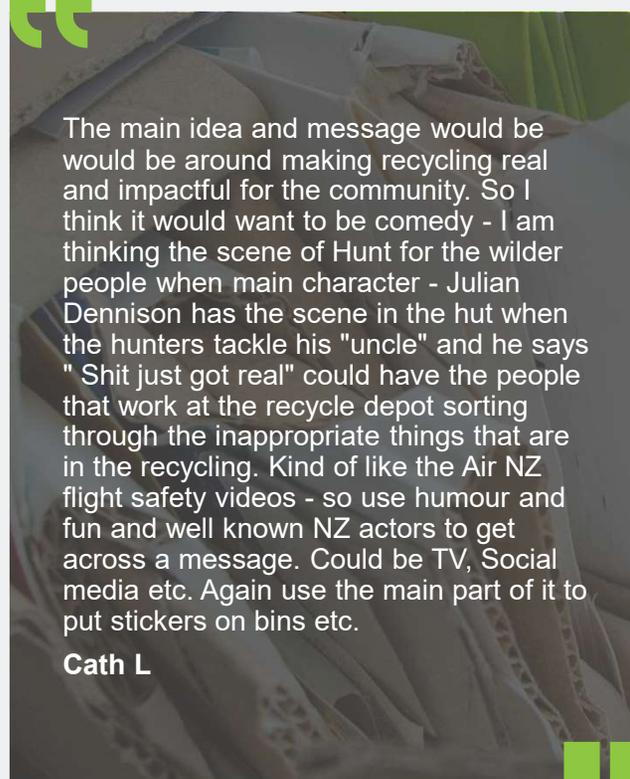
Why others don't recycle



Making recycling seem enjoyable through humour and positivity seems to be important

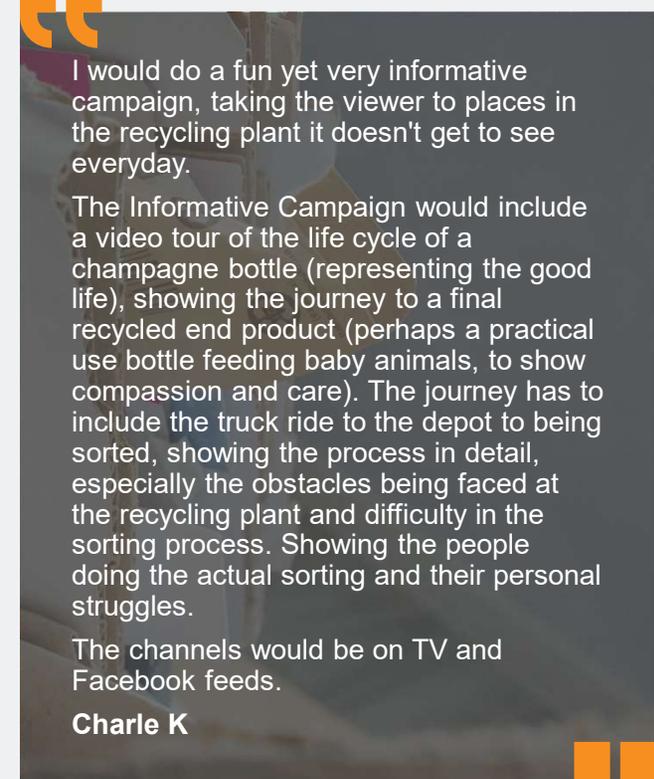


- Bearing in mind that deep down, recycling shows them to be a 'good person', it is not surprising that many respondents articulated a desire for a campaign to be positive, even humorous.
- There were mentions of not being shamed or 'brow beaten' into recycling behaviours.
- This also connects with some people's experiences of having their recycling behaviours corrected through bin audits – including references to the 'recycling police'.
- Anything that contributes to making the process and moment of recycling seem more satisfying seems to be welcomed.



The main idea and message would be around making recycling real and impactful for the community. So I think it would want to be comedy - I am thinking the scene of Hunt for the wilder people when main character - Julian Dennison has the scene in the hut when the hunters tackle his "uncle" and he says "Shit just got real" could have the people that work at the recycle depot sorting through the inappropriate things that are in the recycling. Kind of like the Air NZ flight safety videos - so use humour and fun and well known NZ actors to get across a message. Could be TV, Social media etc. Again use the main part of it to put stickers on bins etc.

Cath L



I would do a fun yet very informative campaign, taking the viewer to places in the recycling plant it doesn't get to see everyday.

The Informative Campaign would include a video tour of the life cycle of a champagne bottle (representing the good life), showing the journey to a final recycled end product (perhaps a practical use bottle feeding baby animals, to show compassion and care). The journey has to include the truck ride to the depot to being sorted, showing the process in detail, especially the obstacles being faced at the recycling plant and difficulty in the sorting process. Showing the people doing the actual sorting and their personal struggles.

The channels would be on TV and Facebook feeds.

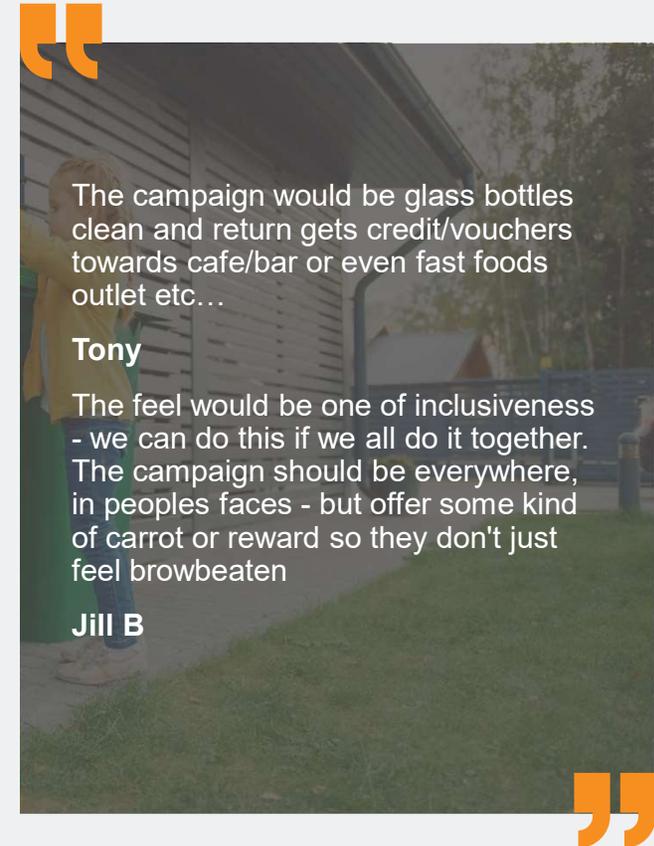
Charle K



This positive vibe was carried through with rewards and competition – thanking, helping and guiding



- A number of people also mentioned incentives to encourage better recycling behaviour.
- Some of these were financial (such as bottle deposits) and others more abstract (such as using celebrities that they aspired to).
- A little gentle competition was also mentioned.
- Bin washes could be a genius incentive – particularly for this group who seemed to have a mild distaste for the dirt and smells associated with recycling.



After the research, what changed for them?



- A few days after the research, we asked people to reflect on their experiences.
- It seems that the **enjoyable engagement around recycling** via the forum increased their sensitivity and commitment to recycling.
- Many people reported seeking out further information and talking to and tackling the behaviours of others within their household.
- Although no single message or idea was recalled strongly, the response points to the **power of reflection on their own behaviour** and others around them.



Conclusion



Bringing it all together...



1. All of this group **believe that recycling is important**, and that they are good (albeit not perfect) at it.



2. They think that deep down recycling shows them to be a **'good person'** (and others that do not recycle are perhaps a little lazy and don't get the importance. They have examples in their household around this).



3. In order to get them to recycle more, **increasing the importance of recycling may not be enough** – they may see that as essentially aimed at other people.



4. What they say they need to recycle better with is **making recycling a little easier for them** – decreasing the stress around identification of plastics would be a good start.



5. But there is an opportunity to **make the moment of recycling a little more satisfying**. They don't want to be told off (they are already 'doing their bit' as a 'good person'), they want to be **thanked, helped and guided**.



6. **Recycling centre workers could be great spokespeople** for this – they bring in a 'real' dimension, empathetic and literally closer to home than more abstract environmental messages.



7. **Positive vibes** (humour, thanks, rewards) all help.



8. A follow up campaign that **helped them to engage other members** of their household would be the cherry on the cake to help them guide others to a more successful recycling outcome for all their household.



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