

BLOG:

YOU MEAN I'VE BEEN DOING IT WRONG!

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Until 6 months ago I had no prior experience of the waste and recycling industry. I was your average at home recycler thinking I was doing pretty well on that side. As a household of 3 we have very little general waste compared to others and were putting most items in our 2 mixed recycling bins except for those items that we know we cannot recycle such as Polystyrene, Black Plastic, Fabrics, and Batteries (a danger I have witnessed first hand after working in the battery industry). However, after a short while of working at RECOUP, seeing our case studies and reports, talking to a variety of people both at work and further afield, and going on a few site visits, I realized just how wrong we have been approaching our daily at home recycling. Especially in the following two areas:

Lids on bottles - I recall briefly seeing something about lids being put back on bottles before you recycle them but with no context as to why, it was more of a suggestion, and unfortunately I am one of those people that needs an answer to the why part or at least for this messaging to come from the local authority who actually manage my bin collections, a source that on this topic I would not query. Therefore, the reasons I had as to why I was not putting lids back on bottles were winning. Firstly the lids of bottles are different colours so am I not doing everyone a favour by separating them. My other point of reasoning was that will the bottles not pop when they are crushed if the lid is

on and potentially be a danger as well as taking up more space in the lorry because they are perhaps a little harder to squash. All ideas that seem utterly ridiculous all of a sudden after being informed at work that the reason we should put lids back on bottles to recycle them is because they are too small and light to be picked up in the recycling stream. Before this I don't think I had ever considered the size and weight of recyclable items being a problem.

Carrier Bags – I'm sure there are many people that unfortunately do the same thing but we were very guilty of being lazy and using a carrier bag to collect recycling when our small kitchen recycling bin was full, rather than venturing outside to the wheelie bin and emptying it. I never thought anything of it until I learnt that that particular carrier bag should actually be going in our general waste bin to decompose as it is compostable and we don't have a compost bin or food waste collection. Equally, when I look back at it now I cannot understand how I thought that carrier bag of mixed recycling would be efficiently emptied when it reached its destination.

There's Plastic in Kitchen Sponges?!

Do you ever get sucked into the wormhole of videos on social media channels? I do, and one night I saw someone saying how you could grow your own kitchen sponge out of loofah. I then found myself wondering if there is plastic in kitchen sponges and was totally surprised to find out that there is. It makes sense because I doubt there are many other materials we would be able to make kitchen sponges out of, I just never thought about it.

In fact, I never really knew that there was more than one type of plastic or just how many everyday items plastics are a part of. I have noticed that my primary school aged daughter and much younger than me, secondary school aged sister, both learn about recycling and the environment much more than was ever taught when I was in school. But it is never too late to learn! I find that I am now more aware of my purchases and more inquisitive as to what materials

they include, I also find myself making more of a conscious effort to recycle correctly rather than just wishcycling.

Will I Ever Get it Correct?

I'm not sure I will ever get it 100% correct but I am at least becoming more aware of what I should be doing. My opinion of the industry so far is that everyone in general is so helpful, wanting to help you understand, wanting to make a difference in the world, and being very welcoming of people like me with no industry knowledge at all. The longer I spend in this industry the more I am learning and the more my actions are changing, however, I never realised just how technical and confusing it would be. With some things such as the bottle lids, all it took was meeting people who could quite simply say to me – this is why you should do that. Yet as someone who does not yet understand all the technicalities like many people in the country possibly never will, all it takes is one technical comment on what is supposed to be an easy to understand message to make me query what I am actually supposed to do all over again.

Having different rules in different counties is another thing making recycling so complicated. It feels as if you need to start becoming an expert on different councils recycling collections. For example, when I visit family in various parts of Wales, yet again I am supposed to know what item to put in what bin. Just imagine the time you would have to spend looking up the do's and don'ts of each different county you visit to be able to get it 100% correct, it all seems much more complicated than it needs to be. In hindsight, these things I have been doing wrong make so much sense and for many people are not the most difficult behaviours to change. It shows the effect that easy to understand and consistent messaging like RECOUP are trying to achieve through Pledge 2 Recycle could have on many households.

The thing that has had the most impact in my 6 months is hands down the 2 visits I have been lucky to go on so far to a Materials Recovery Facility and an Energy Recovery Facility. Until then after our bins are collected I never once thought about what happened next. They were places I never imagined I would

one day be visiting but they have been so fascinating but places that would perhaps be a benefit for everyone to see. To start seeing what happens to items after they leave the house has been a huge eye opener and has really helped me to understand the wider processes and problems faced. It has also started to make me wonder what happens to my household waste, where does my council take it and what happens to it. Maybe someday I will get to find out!