

PAINTING THE RIGHT PICTURE FOR RECYCLING



BY MARIE BINETTE

The world needs more positive recycling stories. Article after article paints an inaccurate picture of our industry, often implying that recycling is pointless.

Beyond the depressing side effect of being constantly inundated by negative news, what is the true cost of this type of media coverage and what can we do to protect our industry from it?

The incomplete and inaccurate picture negative articles create is not simply a damper on our industry's image – these stories fuel a larger narrative that influences the public and, in turn, pressures lawmakers to enact sweeping legislation to fix a “broken” recycling system. Negative news stories generally focus only on the collection side of the recycling cycle, because the average person believes putting an item in a blue box is “recycling.” If that item ends

up in a landfill or at the side of the road or in the ocean then they see it as a failure of the recycling industry. They don't see the scope of material being managed effectively by recyclers every day. They don't see recycling as part of the global manufacturing chain. They don't think about recycling in the choices they make as consumers.

As CARI staff and some of our members have witnessed during meetings, consultations, and facility tours, government officials are also influenced by mainstream media. Few policymakers have firsthand experience with or an acute understanding of the scrap industry, but they have the power to make decisions that affect our industry. If they have never visited a facility, they may not have a clear picture of just how sophisticated and innovative scrap recycling can be, or how the industry fits into the global commodities supply chain.

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LASTWORD

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Marie Binette

This is particularly problematic for recyclers when proposed legislation fails to acknowledge what is working well and simply paints all material collection streams as ineffective and needing improvement. A prime example of this is the draft battery regulations recently introduced in Ontario. As part of a larger set of proposed laws, the draft regulations propose stewardship requirements for producers supplying batteries in the province, including lead batteries. The regulations also propose additional recording, reporting, and registration requirements for haulers and processors

of spent lead batteries.

Why is this significant? In the words of CARI President Tracy Shaw, “Put simply: lead batteries have the highest recycle rate of any consumer product.” The Canadian Battery Association lists the recycling rate of lead batteries in Ontario at 99.97 percent. This exceptionally high recycling rate demonstrates that lead batteries are not being landfilled, and that producers and recyclers have already developed a highly efficient, closed-loop system for these materials. Not only is this production stream not broken, it should be celebrated for being an innovative example of sustainable product design.

Rather than improving on an already exemplary recovery rate, these proposed regulations would disrupt the material flow, add unnecessary costs, and lower the market value of materials – the cost for which will be passed on to consumers. Regulations like these are the reason we as an industry need to educate and advocate.

CARI is always actively promoting the industry’s interests when legislation such as this comes up. Advocacy is a large part of our work, but there is also much to be done to improve our industry’s

image and gain public support. Leaders of recycling associations from around the world recently met at BIR and ISRI’s spring conventions. One of the main topics of discussion was how to combat negative recycling news, with association directors vowing to boost social media and press initiatives that share positive recycling stories. ISRI created the Twitter hashtag #RecyclingWorks to garner online attention for these stories.

Lead batteries are just one of many recycling success stories and it is up to you as industry insiders to help take back the recycling narrative. As a member of the industry, you can take proactive steps by engaging with the press or social media, opening your facility up for public tours, and working with industry associations and publications to build positive stories together. This will help educate government officials and the general public about the differences between municipal collection programs and the complete recycling industry. We must emphasize to the world that recycling is not a single action, and we must shift the focus to all the ways that recycling works.

Marie Binette is CARI’s communications manager.

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