
Tactics in the war on waste

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Pete Shmigel

Perhaps Trump and Putin are sending us into our bins.

We're back in the wars - or at least in the "War on Waste" as presented by Craig Reucassel on ABC.

Last year, it was one of the highest rating programs on our screens with some 750,000 viewers per episode.

In the subsequent year, we've seen related developments like some state governments and the big supermarkets banning single-use plastic bags.

So, besides Craig's talent, what's driven us off our Netflix binges and on to a show about rubbish on our national broadcaster?

What explains the overwhelming 88 per cent of Australians - right across all demographics and the political spectrum - who recently told a leading pollster that they want a national plan for recycling and waste minimisation?

For years the waste we produced from our homes and workplaces was literally "out of sight and out of mind". The "bin fairies" would come in the night to take away our garbage and recycling.

There was limited community interest in what we'd put in those bins, where it was going and what happened to it, how much it cost, and if there were better choices for our whole society. Only us "garbologists" really cared. Now, regular punters talk trash on the sidelines of their kids' Saturday sporting events - and certainly online - and compare notes about their compost heaps, supermarket bag solutions and what containers are or aren't recyclable.

(And, the "bin fairies" are actually part of a \$20 billion per year national industry employing some 50,000 people involved in collecting, transporting, sorting, reprocessing and remanufacturing recycle commodities.) Our views have changed as our society is changing.

Just yesterday, the Herald shared data that Sydney is becoming one of the densest cities on the planet.

Forty per cent of all new dwellings in Australia are now flats.

With this hyper-urbanism, it's plausible that folks need alternatives.

Just like many seek out their food sources now, some increasingly want the environmental connection that recycling and waste minimisation provides.

Some call it a response to urban guilt; others see it as self-interest in keeping the planet going; social research shows strong opposition to the sheer wastefulness of burying stuff in landfills.

Another factor leading us to think more about our garbage, including wanting to convert more of it to resources in a more circular economy, may be the scary world we live in. Social researchers like Hugh Mackay and Mark Textor have observed how, as the international scene that's filled with random terrorism and acts of unilateral aggression, becomes more difficult to understand and spins out of our control, the more we turn to the things we feel have some control over. Our families, our homes, our neighbourhoods, and our digital devices become our havens.

Being more conscious and in control of what we dispose or recycle is a logical extension of finding safety and sanity in the concrete and immediate.

Perhaps in a perverse way, Trump and Putin are sending us into our bins.

In any event, with more than 90 per cent of us regularly and voluntarily participating, recycling is more supported than compulsory voting.

With China now not accepting some 30 per cent of the paper and plastics that we collect from NSW households, and commodity markets depressed by around \$70 million per year for the NSW recycling industry, we need to hope that the community's laudable commitment expands - both in terms of putting the right stuff in the yellow bin and in terms of household shopping.

What we buy - and what Australia makes - is vitally important.

More than 80 per cent of respondents of a recent survey said they wanted food and grocery brands to have to offer recycled content in their products' packaging.

What we do at the cash register is as important to recycling as what we do at the kerbside.

Let's hope public demand will create bigger and more sustainable markets for the 30 million tonnes of material we collect to rank around 17th in the world in recycling performance.

Domestic uses for this material - and policy support of the necessary infrastructure from the \$762 million in waste tax that NSW collects - is key as China is now threatening to ban all recyclable materials from Australia by 2020.

Governments can also do their bit by sourcing recycled content, including for our biggest asset, Australia's roads, which can feature recycled rubble, glass fines and plastic in their construction - all at superior quality and competitive price.

Like other things the community embraces, though, there can initially be zealotry and symbolism involved. Some argue that plastic bag bans fall in those categories - that they're more populist than practical.

It's not hard to draw that conclusion considering bags are about 3 per cent of all the plastic a typical Australian consumes, e.g. two kilograms of the 60 kilograms per year of plastic packaging. Or, when considering our lack of comparative action on products with more significant safety and environment risks.

That includes batteries (which are growing in consumption by more than 200 per cent per year while only 3 per cent are retrieved for recycling) or the wider range of products with cords and plugs (with each of us now owning about four digital devices that inevitably have an end-of-life).

Hence, the "trick" going forward is to combine the community's genuine desire for better waste minimisation with proper technology, purchasing, and evidence. Things just can't feel good; they need to do good in environmental protection and economic growth terms. That's the opportunity for

the National Plan for Recycling and the Circular Economy that environment ministers promised in April.

That's the battle we really have to win in the war on waste.

Pete Shmigel is CEO of the Australian Council of Recycling. He has also worked in mental health, social research and politics.

Roads can feature recycled rubble, glass and plastic.

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