

# Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

## Eco-Speak: A User's Guide to the Language of Recycling



please  
recycle



this box is made from recycled  
fibers and has 35 percent of  
post-consumer content



recyclable

**I**t's no secret that consumers are interested in buying products that are kind to the environment. But when it comes to recycling, can you heed what you read?

The Federal Trade Commission, which seeks to protect consumers from deceptive and unsubstantiated advertising, says claims on products and packaging about recyclability and recycled content may be misunderstood. Here's what the FTC wants consumers to know:

- ➔ A product or package can be marketed as "recyclable" if it can be separated and collected from household and commercial trash for reuse, or to make another product or package, through an established recycling program.
- ➔ Product labels that say "Please Recycle" are relevant only if your community collects the products for recycling—and meaningless if it doesn't. Contact your city or county government to find out about curbside pick-up or drop-off alternatives for recycling plastic, glass, metal, and newspapers and other paper products.
- ➔ Sometimes, businesses recycle products for you. For example, many grocery stores take back their plastic grocery bags. And some manufacturers of toner cartridges have programs that allow consumers to return their empty cartridges, which are then re-used for remanufacturing.
- ➔ Manufacturers and marketers may claim that a product or package has recycled content if it is made with materials that have been recovered or separated from the trash during the manufacturing process (pre-consumer) or after consumer use (post-consumer). Previously used newspapers, shipping cartons, plastic bottles, glass containers, and metal cans are considered post-consumer waste. Leftover manufacturing scraps—for example, the scraps left over when envelopes are cut from paper—are considered pre-consumer waste.

- ➔ Recycled products are made from products that have been melted down or ground up and made into new products. Or they may have been made from materials that are used, reconditioned or remanufactured. If a product is labeled *recycled* because it contains used, reconditioned or remanufactured parts, the label also must say the product is “used,” “reconditioned” or “remanufactured” unless that fact is obvious to the buyer.
- ➔ If a label says “recycled,” it must tell the percentage of recycled content—unless it’s 100 percent.
- ➔ Certain symbols placed on consumer products mean that you may be able to recycle the product or package—depending on your community’s program—or that the product or package is made from recycled materials.



This universal recycling symbol means that the product is both recyclable and made of recycled materials. If only one of these claims is true, the manufacturer should say which one.



Manufacturers use this look-alike symbol, developed by the Society of the Plastics Industry, to indicate the type of plastic used for the packaging. SPI code numbers range from 1 to 7. Check with your local recycling office to find out which codes are acceptable for recycling in *your* community. Not all communities collect and recycle containers with the same codes.

**The bottom line:** Every community has its own recycling program. Just because a product or package carries the universal recycling symbol or says it’s recyclable doesn’t mean it will be collected for recycling in *your* neighborhood. To help your community save the time and money it spends separating the items it recycles from the ones it doesn’t, find out which are appropriate for the recycling bins. If you have questions about a particular item, check with your local recycling office.

For more information about general advertising issues, write to the FTC’s Consumer Response Center, FTC, Washington, DC 20580, or visit the FTC online at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov).