ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE REPORT: RECYCLING IN NYC IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK

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Illustration by Olexa Hewryk

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The City, a nonprofit news organization that reports on local issues for New Yorkers, recently published an article called “Recycling in NYC Is Easier Than You Think: A Guide for the Confused.” It includes an interview with a New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) spokesperson, provides general information about recycling in NYC, and debunks myths about the topic. The PSFC Environmental Committee has summarized the tips to help us recycle more effectively:

I’m not sure I can recycle this object. I should throw it in the trash to avoid wishful recycling and potentially contaminating the recycle stream, right?

Nope! In New York, if you think it might be recyclable, it’s better to put it in the recycle bin than in the garbage. “If you’re not sure, let us take care of it. We are the experts. If you put it in the trash, it definitely doesn’t get recycled,” said Joshua Goodman, spokesperson for DSNYC.

What materials are most likely to be recycled?

Paper and metal are more likely to be repurposed. Plastics and glass are more likely to end up in landfills if they can’t be resold.

Is this plastic-lined carton (e.g. the ones that contain soup stocks and plant milks) recyclable? Does it belong in the paper recycling?

Plastic-lined cartons do not belong in paper recycling, but they do belong in the other recycling stream which consists of metals, plastics, and glass.

Should I recycle this paper?

Yes, any paper product you can think of, besides the plastic-lined cartons, can be included with paper recycling.

Can I recycle paper coffee cups?

Yes, plastic coffee cup lids should go in the metal, plastic, and glass bin. The cup goes into paper recycling.

How about brown take-out containers with a wax or plastic lining?

Yes, throw it in paper recycling. All the material can’t be pulped because of the lining

but they can use some of it.

Envelopes with plastic film windows? Do I need to remove the film?

You can put the whole thing in paper recycling. Recyclers can take out the plastic liner and metal pieces.

Used pizza boxes?

Yes, these can be thrown in the paper recycling, even if it’s greasy or cheesy. Just remove the crusts or any leftovers first.

Wood like a cutting board or chopsticks?

These should go in the compost, not in paper recycling.

Can I recycle this rigid plastic thing?

Yes, any rigid plastic can be recycled. It’s rigid plastic if it maintains its shape when it’s on the counter.

What items can be recycled that are surprising?

Empty hairspray and aerosol cans, pots and pans even if they are non-stick, plastic takeout containers and small appliances made of mostly metal or plastic without rechargeable batteries, such as microwaves or toasters.

What about this broken glass, knife or other sharp objects?

No, it’s better to double bag the items and put them in the trash for worker safety.

What else is definitely not recyclable?

Styrofoam, fake Christmas trees, disposable gloves, face masks, ceramics, eyeglasses, mirrors, lightbulbs, floppy and filmy plastic bags, bubble wrap, cellophane (i.e. cling wrap), cables, string lights, hoses and extension cords.

What do I do with plastic bags then?

Though larger retailers are required to provide bins for recycling plastic bags, these are hard to recycle and often have fewer reuses than rigid plastics.

Do I need to throw containers with certain numbers away?

Nope! In NYC, throw all plastic containers with a number in the recycle.

Do I need to scrub containers clean before I recycle it?

No, rinse off recyclable items, but no need to scrub or use too much water. If it's mostly empty, you can put it in the recycling bin.

What about this greasy aluminum foil?

Yep, NYC accepts all aluminum foil, even if it's soiled.

What about this item with mixed materials, such as an oatmeal tin which has a paper middle, metal bottom and plastic top?

It can go in either recycle bin. You can rip it apart and recycle each component separately, but you don't have to. Just don't throw it in the trash.

How about metal and plastic caps?

Ideally the plastic caps should be kept on the bottles or containers, but it's okay if you forget and put them in the bin separately. Metal caps can be tossed in by themselves

or kept on the bottles.

Where can I find more information?

Again: Recycling in NYC Is Easier Than You Think: A Guide for the Confused. Also, check out DSNYC's website. PSFC Environmental Committee: psfc.environmental.committee@gmail.com

Image source: Courtesy of SWANA