

Reuse v recycling

Enough of recycling the same arguments on household refuse – it's time to combat waste with reuse, writes **Patrick Stead**

■ WHEN THIS COUNTRY PERIODICALLY STOPS AND EXAMINES ITS APPALLING RECORD ON

household waste, one conclusion is always reached: we must recycle more. My view is that this simplistic approach misses the point and places an unacceptable burden on hard-pressed households that are already at the mercy of their local council on waste collections.

If we are going to get real about combating household waste, then decision-makers need to shift their focus away from this delusion that recycling alone will solve the problem. In particular we need to look more seriously at reuse.

Reuse is far better for the environment than recycling which, particularly in the case of plastics, can actually be quite inefficient. While recycling undoubtedly has its place, it is worth thinking about the process itself. Often it involves using a heat-based industrial process to break a product down into its constituent parts and then using them to make new products. It is worth noting that, once broken down, not everything can be reused. In energy use alone, this can prove hugely wasteful. A recent Computer Aid report found that reusing working computers is up to 20 times more energy efficient than recycling them.

Instead of turning an item into a raw material for use in a new product, why not design it in such a way that it can be reused for its original purpose? So much of the waste filling our landfill sites to bursting point is products or packaging that have been made for one use only. Yet there are hundreds of everyday products in the home, from perfume bottles to printer cartridges, that could easily be refilled and reused to prevent huge amounts of unnecessary waste going to landfill.

Manufacturers can make the biggest difference to reducing waste and tackling environmental pollution by incorporating reuse at the design stage. Too many products have obsolescence built in – which I see all the time in the printer cartridge industry – along with technical barriers that serve no other function beyond preventing and prohibiting reuse.

Reuse is not a new concept: putting milk bottles out to be collected, cleaned and refilled was ingrained behaviour for decades. If something performs the task perfectly for which it was designed, there is no logical reason for us to throw it away only to then buy a newer or identical version that has been refilled with the product that we wanted to buy in the first place. Good examples of this are perfume, coffee, ink, fabric conditioner and many other consumer staples. It is



Stead: Reducing waste starts with product manufacturers not householders

the overly elaborate packaging or unnecessarily complicated containers that house the very thing that we want to buy that are the problem.

It is encouraging to see refill pouches appearing for some products such as fabric conditioners and coffee, but these examples are few and far between. What we really need is a cultural shift in the way all of us – politicians, manufacturers, retailers and consumers alike – think about these so-called waste items. Having had our collective minds focused by the effects of the recession, society is focusing on waste and inefficiency like never before, which makes this the perfect time to apply the same thinking to household waste.

Taking on producers will require strong government, which has been noticeable by its absence in this area for so long. Getting heavy-handed with a homeowner who accidentally puts a plastic wrapper in the wrong recycling box is one thing, but working with businesses to instigate change at a more senior level is something else altogether. Critically this is what is needed and has been the case for decades.

We can do our bit individually as consumers, with reuse as well as recycling, but the pressure must be put on manufacturers in the first instance. However well intentioned, we cannot expect to kick our waste habit with a weekly trip to the bottle bank. ■

Patrick Stead is the founder and chief executive of Environmental Business Products, a leading collector and remanufacturer of used inkjet cartridges