



Providing Friendly Feedback on Recycling Contamination

How we tested a new method to reduce residential recycling contamination in multi-unit dwellings

The **National Waste Policy 2018** includes strategies for improving waste communication and reducing recycling contamination, which this research aims to address. This research in support of the Policy was conducted in partnership between the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and **ACT NoWaste** in **September 2019**.

Contamination of recycling by plastic bags is a significant problem across Australia. It is particularly prevalent in multi-unit dwellings (apartment or townhouse complexes). In previous research we identified common personas of household recyclers, including 'plastic baggers'. Based on these personas, we designed an intervention aiming to reduce plastic-bagging behaviour.

INTERVENTION

A whiteboard incorporating **behavioural insights** was trialled at 10 sites in the ACT over two months in 2019.

Whiteboards were updated based on residents' real recycling performance, as measured by fortnightly bin audits.

Effectiveness was measured through 16 in-depth interviews with residents following the two months period, as well as informal conversations with strata managers and bin audit data.

Findings included:

- ✓ **Overcame sign blindness**—most interviewed residents had noticed the whiteboard.
- ✓ **Intervention positively received**—residents were very happy to see messages from management about recycling.
- ✓ **Behaviour changed**—at least one 'plastic bagger' stopped that behaviour in response to the whiteboard.
- ✓ **Easy and cheap intervention**—very few instances of theft were encountered, and no graffiti.



WHAT'S NEXT?

This intervention could be replicated and trialled by building managers or local councils to trial its effect on recycling contamination and other waste management issues at a larger scale and in a mix of locations.

COMMON PERSONAS THAT WERE USED TO INFORM THE WHITEBOARD DESIGN



PLASTIC BAGGERS

- Dump recyclables inside plastic bags.
- Believe that bags are recyclable.
- Have a steady supply of plastic bags.



NEW RECYCLERS

- Have migrated from somewhere with different or less robust recycling system.
- Lack experience & are unsure of what can be recycled.
- Get information from other new recyclers.



THE OVERCONFIDENT MAJORITY

- Believe they are already fully informed.
- Make at least one significant error
- Do not pay attention to signs or communication materials.
- May proactively try to change fellow residents' behaviour.

THE WHITEBOARD DESIGN

Inclusive language taps into people's **social identity** and **instinct for mutual support**.

Personalising information makes people more likely to respond.

Showing the desired behaviour is the **social norm** encourages people to perform it.



Being visually distinct from the usual printed signage makes the sign 'salient'.

Simplifying the message so it is easy to understand makes people more likely to act.

Timely feedback helps people to monitor performance and achieve a goal.

A **trusted messenger** gives the information more weight.

