



Confronting Organics

Communications guide

Table of Contents

Confronting Organics by Effectively Communicating Your Collection Approach	3
Take a Snapshot	4
Backyard Composting	5
Drop-Off and Curbside Collection	6
Communicate Your Collection Approach	7

Confront Organics: A Guide to Effectively Communicating Your Collection Approach

Food represents the single largest component of disposed municipal solid waste. That's about 22 percent of all trash in North America, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), yet just six percent of this material ends up composted, anaerobically digested or otherwise handled outside of a landfill. And landfills packed with wasted food contribute significantly to global climate change, emitting harmful greenhouse gases.

Recognizing the seriousness of this problem, the EPA and USDA in 2015 set a national goal of cutting food waste in half by 2030, which equates to reducing the amount of discarded food by about 110 pounds per person per year, according to [Waste Dive](#).

The heat is on in California, where [Senate Bill 1383](#) now requires jurisdictions to provide organics education and collection — and to quantify outcomes to meet targets starting January 2022 — as the state works to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and curb its effects on the climate.

Other states are following California's lead, including Tennessee and Washington. In roughly the first half of 2021, lawmakers introduced at least 52 food waste bills in 18 states. And several cities, including Los Angeles and Madison, Wis., recently have created food waste task forces, according to the nonprofit food newsroom [The Counter](#).

Municipalities striving to improve overall landfill diversion rates, too, have identified food waste and organics — a broader category that includes food as well as yard waste, both of which produce the greenhouse gas methane under oxygen-starved landfill conditions — as the next green frontier. Such is the case in [Denver](#), where curbside composting is helping the city clean up its carbon footprint and increase landfill diversion at the same time.

Long-term solutions to the organic waste issue will require collaboration across industry and government sectors. Crafting and communicating effectively about local organic waste solutions is one way that recycling educators can continue to make a difference — today and every day.



Take a Snapshot

If you're charged with implementing a new organics program — or ramping up your current one — your first task is to get a snapshot of your opportunities. Many operational and business considerations will influence how an individual program approaches each of the steps below.



- Begin with the end in mind: It only makes sense to collect materials that your program can process, so start your program research here. What options do you have in your region for organics processing — and what materials do these processors accept?



- Material and volume. Now that you have an idea of what you could collect, it's time to make estimates about materials and volume. Which processor(s) on your list can handle the volume of material you'll collect?



- Sorting and storage. Depending on the scope of your program, you might provide people with countertop bins to help them sort and store food waste. Consider a lidded container to help contain smells and deter common pests.



- Collection methods. The materials accepted in the program and where they're going will help determine the collection method you use. In the curbside collection scenario, hauling will be the most expensive part of providing the program and may increase costs to participants, which will be an important part of educating them about the program.



- End use. One way to design promotability right into your program is to create a plan for end use that benefits your community and allows people to use the resulting compost in their home gardens.



Tip: Talk to your processor about when you can expect changes in acceptable materials, if ever. Think about how you will communicate updates to participants in a timely manner to keep contamination low.

Backyard Composting

If you're just getting started, a no-haul solution for keeping food waste and other organics out of the landfill is backyard composting. You can teach people to keep the right food scraps out of the trash, educate them about how and why to compost them at home, and provide helpful tools—such as a countertop container with an explanatory decal—to get them going in the right direction.

What goes in:



Encourage a mixture of half “greens” and half “browns.” Browns are generally yard debris, such as sticks and dry leaves. Greens are fruit and vegetable scraps, eggshells, coffee grounds, tea bags and other greens. Picturing these items on a “kitchen-catcher” decal will help people understand, regardless of the languages they speak.

What doesn't go in:



Backyard compost piles don't reach the high temperatures required to quickly and safely degrade foods like meat, bones and dairy products. Teach residents to keep them out by picturing them on your decal with a red “X” to show they're a no-no.

How it works:



By mixing brown and green materials — and keeping the compost pile moist (never drenched) and aerated by flipping or mixing it up — organic materials break down into a rich soil amendment for the home garden. Composting this way works because water and air create the right environment for aerobic digestion of organic materials. (Inside an oxygen-starved landfill, materials break down anaerobically, a byproduct of which is harmful methane.)



Tip: Include simple, pictorial instructions on your kitchen-catcher decal, along with words in the language or languages spoken by participants. Images speak to everyone.



Drop-Off and Curbside Collection

If you're able to provide a drop-off site for organics or a curbside collection program, it's likely that more materials will be accepted by your processor, allowing you to keep even more food waste out of the landfill. As previously mentioned, backyard compost piles degrade materials at a lower temperature. Other processes create temperatures high enough for foods such as meat, bones and dairy.



Static aerated piles:
Stacked atop perforated pipes that deliver air, static aerated piles allow for aerobic digestion and material breakdown.



Windrows:
These large, triangular rows get turned and watered to speed decomposition.



In-vessel systems:
Large operations may use environment-controlled, in-vessel systems that handle more material in less space and process it more quickly.



Anaerobic digestion:
These technologies process organics with micro-organisms that don't require oxygen.



Tip: Get more information about backyard composting from The Compost Council of Canada.



Communicate Your Collection Approach

While launching a new program can be daunting, we know from experience that as long as the operational puzzle pieces fit together, program coordinators can foster success by adopting the following seven best practices for communicating about a new organics program.

1. Create a Plan:

While the nuts and bolts of municipal organics program delivery vary widely — with collection and disposal (composting) handled by the municipality, third-party vendors, or a combination — the key to reaching program goals remains constant.

Effective, efficient communication with the residents who use the program will enable you to meet your objectives for diversion, compliance and positive environmental impact.

It all begins with a practical yet detailed plan for how you'll introduce residents to the new program, onboard them with timely education, anticipate their questions, and keep them engaged.

Your plan needs to address the three “Ts”:



Team: Identify the people on your project team and what each person's role will be. Once you know who's working with you, you'll be able to figure out who owns which tasks.



Tasks: Outline the steps needed to launch your new program. Start by defining the parts of the project, perhaps in order of when they need to happen: Pre-launch communication, new service communication, and follow-up. Then get nitty-gritty. For example, if you want to provide a printed “FAQ” sheet to each resident with container delivery, you'll need to identify acceptable and unacceptable materials; draft the document and build in time for internal feedback; identify a designer and printer and identify how long those processes will take; and figure out how the completed resource will be kept dry and attached to the container. Having trouble getting started? Try working backward from your target.



Targets: As you create tasks and due dates, work toward making timelines realistic rather than aspirational. Nothing kills project momentum quite like impossible targets! Targets also include overall goals. With your team, answer: What does the program need to accomplish in the big picture, and how does communication support our broader operational and organizational goals?



Tip: Build a tactical project plan using an Excel spreadsheet. Create columns for team, task, description, deadlines, resources required, and extra planning notes.

2.Leverage Local:

Share program information with local media and grassroots organizations to help reach a broad audience – and be sure your customer service team is prepared to interact with people who hear about the program and reach out with further questions.



Prepare. Gather important details, such as who can take part, when the program begins, what materials are included, and where residents can learn more.



Develop. Create a program “FAQ” document for the customer service team and other frontline staff members, then provide training on the document. Always communicate internally first and externally second.



Distribute. Once the internal team is confident on program specifics, create a press release to share externally with local media: TV, newspapers and radio, as well as digital-only news providers and social accounts in your area. Share with local sustainability organizations, too.



Tip: Build a media kit based on your FAQ document. This will help reporters self-educate about your program and help save you time!



3. Tap into Events

Host an educational activity about your program to connect directly with residents and build trust, answer questions, and gain a better understanding of any program objections and challenges so that you can address them in future educational materials.



Promote: Use your website, social media, and community bulletin boards (digital and traditional) to get the word out. Don't forget to share the details with aligned community organizations (see No. 2).



Display: Share educational collateral with residents and ask for their questions and input.



Swag: Provide free items such as stickers, reusable bags and magnets that include your website and important program details (if there's room).



Surveys: Measure the effectiveness of in-person events by providing a brief post-event survey that relates to your goals.



Tip: As your program's "eyes and ears," the communication team — even if it's just one person — often occupies a unique position to deliver important feedback and ideas to the operations team to improve customer service and efficiency.



The City of Saskatoon helps residents understand what belongs in their green carts through a variety of media, including online videos. (Image credit: City of Saskatoon website)

4.Ply All Platforms

Using many different platforms to educate about your program will help you meet community members where they are and ensure a wide understanding of your program, its benefits, and how to get involved. According to the Carton Council, “strategically using a variety of media to communicate to the public engages more participation.” Bake into your communication plan a series of messages to share across various media: owned (social media, website, blog), earned (community partner sites and social media), and paid (local newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations).

You can “batch” content around specific messages to maximize your efforts:

- Program start date
- Benefits highlights
- Accepted/non-accepted materials
- Kitchen bin and curbside cart maintenance tips
- How-tos, such as making paper bin liners from newspaper
- Invitations to facility open houses
- Delivery information: What residents get — and when
- Links to resources, such as collection calendars and “what goes in” databases



Tip: Approach local newspapers and radio and television stations about free public service announcements.

5. Capitalize on Carts & Containers

Providing curbside collection? Take advantage of cart and kitchen bin deliveries by including program information with containers.



Program Packet: Create a guide to help residents use the organics program. You also can include a refresher on other waste and recycling services.



Samples: Include approved kitchen container bags and/or coupons



Signage: Add a decal to kitchen containers to visually depict what goes in and what doesn't.



Tip: For organics drop-off sites, ample signage about what's compostable is critical. Check out [Fairfax County, Va.'s website](#) for examples of clear graphics.



Including photos of what's compostable on kitchen bins, as in the District of Squamish, British Columbia, helps people understand 'what goes in' right when they need that information most: at the time of disposal. (Image credit: ReCollect)

6. Make Your Website the Program Hub

When all your materials and promotions direct residents to your website, you teach them it's the best place to find the answers to questions about your programs. On its website, the City of Brookline, Mass. tells residents about their curbside collection program and includes a searchable materials database. Your website also can supply you with the data you need to tailor your messages to real resident needs.



Centralize: For simplicity, keep all program details in one place on your site.



Antalyze: Gain insight into your website visitors' needs through analytics and add visibility to the most commonly searched materials.



Engage: Encourage residents to sign up for digital reminders so you can quickly educate them about program changes as they arise.



Connect: Ensure you're able to connect with all of your residents by offering different language options and providing them with accessibility compliant communications tools. Being accessible is not only the law, it is the right thing to do.



Tip: Digital communication tools and apps that integrate with your website can provide easy-to-access analytics and help you stay in touch with residents with less effort.



Fairfax County, Va. includes the link and QR code for its organics website in communications. (Image credit: The County of Fairfax)

7. Stand Out to Keep Up

Even as we encourage program participation and help residents adopt new behaviors through our communications, it's important as educators to understand the unprecedented volume of messaging that the average person is exposed to each day. More than ever before, we are charged with cutting through the clutter — as the City of Toronto does with [this video](#) — to keep the value of participating in our programs top-of-mind. This begs the question: On a limited budget, what's the key to maintaining resident engagement for the months and years after program launch?



Branding: For a municipal organics program, branding looks like expertise and reliability. When you provide accurate, timely information and service that residents can depend on, you're building trust in what you do and what you say. That's the heart of a brand, and being trustworthy will make your program stand out like nothing else.



Content: By its very nature, the content you create about your programs is on its way to “value-added” status: Residents likely can't get it anywhere else. Exclusive content that's in the right place at the right time? Now that's the whole enchilada!



Analytics: Digital tools and apps can make communication with residents quicker and easier. Digital analytics resulting from resident uptake of these tools also can inform your messaging by providing valuable insights about things like what's confusing people (search terms) and what's most helpful to them (page views).



Tip: Streamline your communications about waste, recycling and organics programs through technology and automation.

Whether you're kicking off an organics program to meet a new legal requirement — or because it's time to evolve your solid waste services to meet objectives for diversion and greenhouse gas reduction — [digital tools for recycling education](#) can help you communicate with program participants early and often with clear, simple instructions, that prepare everyone for success.

Let's Talk