



**PART
TWO**

RALLYING AROUND **REUSE**

The second part of our series addresses some of the challenges posed by undertaking reuse and lays out examples of successful efforts.

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The Scrap Exchange in North Carolina (top two photos) and New York's Finger Lakes ReUse (bottom) have both sparked social and economic benefits through reuse.

As we mentioned last month in the first part of this series, reuse can bring us closer to a sustainable, circular economy. By extending the life cycle of our products, we use fewer resources, generate less waste and reduce environmental impacts. Through these opportunities, reuse can spur economic growth, job creation and a healthy environment.

Of course, reuse is not without its challenges.

For many people, the very term "reuse" denotes charity cases or products that are inferior. An information barrier clearly exists for consumers, manufacturers and businesses. An emphasis on the value, functionality and quality of reused items can help increase consumer confidence. Standards and specifications for durability, reuse and repair are needed for producers. Reuse procurement standards are also essential.

When it comes to addressing such roadblocks, just knowing where to start can be difficult. Those in established reuse businesses recommend pulling together stakeholders and strategic partners to explore and plan the type of reuse opportunity that will be most successful. Inviting the community to participate, or at least surveying community members, can foster an understanding

of reuse needs, encourage greater interest and develop a pool of volunteers.

It's also wise, of course, to look at successful models. This step provides concrete insights, which can then be used to develop a business plan for a new reuse program. In the paragraphs below, we'll describe a wide range of reuse operations that are making a difference in their respective communities. For each example, find the "keys to success" that can serve as helpful tips to those looking to launch or bolster their own reuse efforts.

Strong communication and planning

Several communities in Massachusetts have implemented annual reuse events that can serve as inspiration. Northampton has developed a sustainable model for diverting reusable items with assistance from a committed group of volunteers. With support from the city's waste management department and startup resources provided by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Northampton Reuse Committee has been holding successful one-day collection events since 2011. Annual events

include a community tag sale and costume swap, an autumn reuse and recycling rally and a toy exchange.

Some of the keys for success for these established programs: Have a plan for crowd control; create an upbeat, festival-like, community atmosphere; utilize social media, listservs, municipal websites and local press; consider that some amount of municipal staffing is necessary; and work with local community groups to find a “home” for leftover items.

Also in Massachusetts, the towns of Ayer and Shirley offer a unique combination of reuse and recycling. Recycle Your Reusables is a drive-up, drop-off opportunity for residents to beneficially discard both reusables and recyclables. The sixth annual event, held in 2014, saw more than 350 cars dropping off nearly 4 tons of textiles, 16 barrels of paper for shredding, 2500 pounds of books, 30 cubic yards each of non-bottle rigid plastics and expanded polystyrene and more.

This effort has been successful thanks to administrators who plan for enough space to facilitate all the cars and donation trucks. The event has also been able to connect with a number of end markets: Recycle Your Reusables brings together some 25 organizations accepting more than 100 different items, from appliances to wine corks.

More examples of reuse in action can be seen in New York state. The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) worked with the Development Authority of the North Country, county solid waste offices, nonprofit organizations, the State of New York Department of Environmental Conservation and community representatives in New York’s North Country to organize reuse trainings and events. Thus far, projects have included a toy exchange, college move-out events and two community tag sales. In St. Lawrence County, a reuse partnership has been formed to explore the organization of a reuse center focusing on deconstruction, job training and sales of used items.

These programs have been driven by strong partnerships that include government and nonprofit organizations. In addition, organizers leverage a range of outreach strategies, including press releases and social media.

The triple bottom line

Other examples show how reuse can be the foundation for business growth.

Ithaca, N.Y.-based Finger Lakes ReUse incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 2007 thanks to partnerships with Tompkins County Solid Waste, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, Ithaca College, Cornell University and others. Today, the operation has 18 employees and an annual operating budget of \$850,000, including \$440,399 in merchandise sales and \$50,700 in service fees (deconstruction, computer repair and delivery). Since its inception, it has diverted more than 1400 tons of material, generating more than \$2.1 million in revenue. Its triple-bottom-line mission is to enhance community, economy and environment through reuse.

Using a business-based approach, its core business operations were established first: a reuse center retailing building materials, furniture, computers/electronics, and housewares; deconstruction services; and a computer-refurbishing program. Its programs now include the Ithaca Fixers Collective, ReSET Job Training Program, and a second reuse center (opening in 2015).

The group’s keys to success include community engagement, mission development and a business-based approach that offers convenience, quality and affordability.

In Berkeley, Calif., meanwhile, Urban Ore operates as a for-profit salvage and retail enterprise with a social mission. The company’s founder, Daniel Knapp, is well-known for his entrepreneurial vision and dedication to waste salvaging. Established in 1981, this highly successful operation is fully self-sufficient and financially sustainable, earning some \$2.6 million in revenues in 2013. Its Ecopark Store, consisting of a 30,000-square-foot warehouse and a 3-acre outdoor sales lot, contains a range of building materials and household items.

Around 75 percent of its inventory is obtained through donations from builders, junk haulers, residents and others. Other material is sourced through a contract it holds with the city of Berkeley to haul materials from its transfer station. That municipal support has been crucial, and the company’s strategy of separating its operations into several affordable locations has helped control costs.

Getting creative

Creative reuse offers communities the opportunity to divert waste and support educators, artists, nonprofit organizations and others. Collaboration

between manufacturers, retailers and art communities can help put useful discards to beneficial results.

Materials for the Arts (MFTA) is the first creative reuse center in New York City and one of the largest reuse centers in the country. MFTA is unique in that it takes donations of unwanted and surplus arts and theater supplies, as well as office furniture and materials, and makes them available to nonprofit organizations, government agencies and public schools. Resident artists, with studio space at MFTA’s warehouse, demonstrate and inspire others to create artwork from reusable items.

Similarly, The Scrap Exchange, a nonprofit group in Durham, N.C., is a noteworthy creative reuse center that’s been in existence for 24 years. The Exchange accepts reusable items from residents, manufacturers and businesses. The group also provides educational workshops on creative reuse, and includes an art gallery of local artists’ works.

The Exchange has been successful at supporting itself through retail sales, fee-for-service programs (services and space for art creation, upcycled products and educational activities) and external donations. The Exchange also excels at promoting itself through its extensive partnerships with the local arts community, the public school system, county government, senior centers, hospitals, manufacturers and corporations.

Don’t toss it, fix it

Another notable reuse trend to emerge of late is Repair Cafes – they are events at which skilled people volunteer their time to coach people on fixing broken items. Repair Cafes are popping up around the U.S. and Europe, bringing together people to fix broken housewares, mend torn clothing, sharpen tools and more.

In New York, the Hudson Valley Repair Cafe program is a good example of this fix-it model for expanding product life cycles, reducing waste and saving money. The communities of Gardiner, Kingston, New Paltz, Poughkeepsie, Rhinebeck and Rosendale hold repair events that are open to the public.

Some other examples of repair efforts are the Fix-it Cafe offered by the Repurpose Project (a creative reuse center in Gainesville, Fla.) and the Cambridge Repair Cafe, organized by the Cambridge (Mass.) Department of Public Works.

Finally, Fixit Clinics are “pop up” repair events in locations interested in reuse

and repair. Fixit Clinics have been held in California, Colorado, Minnesota, Ohio and Oregon.

States are also focusing on textiles reuse by devoting resources to make it easier for communities to set up permanent textile collection programs. Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York have developed programs to establish permanent textile collection sites and promote a consistent message about textile reuse.

A unique collaboration raising awareness of textile recovery is the Re-Clothe NY program, spearheaded by the New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse and Recycling. The organization partnered with the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles trade group and the Council for Textile Recycling for developing materials for the textiles campaign. The program collected over 100,000 pounds of textiles in the first months after starting in November of 2014, and many times that since. In 2015, the program received the U.S. EPA's Environmental Champion Award.

Government support

Even if funding is limited, municipalities can take the lead in establishing reuse enterprises and events. Policies and contracts with solid waste facilities – and working with businesses to evaluate waste streams – can help foster reuse. Direct financial support, such as low-cost financing and tax abatements, can help reuse businesses get established.

Providing technical assistance, fostering collaborations and creating public awareness campaigns are low-cost ways for governments to support reuse. Innovative reuse support strategies include procurement

Operational obstacles

The reuse concept may seem simple, but getting a significant program off the ground can be complex.

Reuse businesses require low-cost space for their materials, whether they're building materials, housewares or art supplies. Adding to the challenge, a convenient and accessible location is desirable, along with adequate parking and accommodations for a range of vehicle types. Maximizing efficiencies in receiving, processing and selling items can help provide at least temporary reprieve in overcoming space limitations. Also, designing the business and inventory to address community wants and needs helps ensure product

turnover.

Staffing can also be a challenge for both reuse businesses and for communities hosting reuse events. Establishing a reuse committee and a pool of volunteers can help. Providing volunteers with meaningful tasks, respecting their time limitations and providing recognition is a must.

Tracking data – number of customers, participants, sales, materials diverted and greenhouse gas reductions – is important for showing results. Demonstrating and documenting the benefits and solutions provided to the community will ensure support, whether it's for funding or community involvement.

policies that emphasize product reuse and leasing as well as streamlined permitting processes.

Recently, U.S. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy noted the following: "It's a great reminder that solutions to environmental challenges can double as solutions to social challenges." While McCarthy was speaking about food waste reduction and recovery, her statement certainly applies to the value of all forms of reuse.

Reuse allows for individual action and engagement – donating clothing, purchasing used building materials or learning how to repair a broken device – that extend product life cycles, support local business, and contribute to social good. Reuse businesses, whether nonprofit or for-profit, small or large, are engaging in a multitude of activities helping to pave the way toward a more sustainable, circular economy.

Extracting the maximum economic value out of our products through reuse presents the world with a new entrepreneurial spirit. **RR**

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