

Trash Talk: Signs of the Times and What They Mean

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January 23, 2010

Can all plastics marked with a three-arrow triangle and number be recycled? If only.

North York resident Dorothy Coyle wrote Trash Talk asking about this. Before I started learning about trash, I assumed, as she did, that a triangle on the bottom meant into the blue bin.

The triangle and number system was devised in 1988 by the Society of the Plastics Industry as a resin identification code. Numbers inside the triangle range from 1 to 7, and there's often an acronym underneath – PET or PETE, HDPE, LDPE, PS, PP – specifying the type of plastic.

The symbols don't indicate recyclability, but they were designed to help residents sort out what plastics are covered by local recycling programs. That doesn't always work, though, as we've discussed in this column. Plastics within the same category may differ in chemistry or in colour, making one container recyclable, the other problematic. Case in point: clear plastic egg cartons and produce boxes marked with a "1", which can't be recycled in most jurisdictions, despite carrying the same PET plastic designation as drink bottles.

So that's why many municipalities have switched to identifying recyclable plastics by type of container rather than resin code number.

Never-Ending Circle

Whoever came up with the resin identification code for plastics cleverly took inspiration from the three-arrow recycling symbol, which is one of the world's most recognized logos.

The design, configured as a Möbius strip, was created by a 23-year-old University of Southern California student for a contest sponsored by the Container Corporation of America to find a paper recycling symbol. That was in 1970, the year Earth Day was launched.

For his stroke of genius, the student, Gary Dean Anderson, received \$2,500, which he used to continue his studies in Sweden. The design was influenced by the eye-teasing art of M.C. Escher, the Möbius strip, the pure wool logo and Buddhist mandala symbols.

He went on to work for consulting firms in planning, design and environmental engineering. He also taught architecture and planning.

If the symbol, which is in the public domain, appears within a circle, that indicates the product contains recycled material.

Certifying Green

Ottawa might be dragging its feet on climate change these days, but two decades ago Brian Mulroney's Tories launched innovative environmental policies, including a green-product certification program unveiled at a 1988 atmospheric change conference in Toronto.

The result is the EcoLogo, three doves forming a maple leaf, which you might have seen on paints and cleaning products. By 1993, the program was in bureaucratic disarray and under attack from industry sectors, a couple of ministers and environmentalists.

"It was ironic, because the three doves (in the logo) are supposed to be government, industry and consumers working hand in hand to improve the environment," says John Polak, called in to rectify the situation from another government department.

Given fiscal restraint, the program was privatized in 1995 by then Liberal environment minister Sheila Copps. Polak joined the group, TerraChoice, that took it over, and within 16 months, he says, it was self sustaining. Ottawa still owns the EcoLogo mark.

EcoLogo sets standards by evaluating existing guidelines, looking at life cycle

data, securing input from stakeholders and submitting proposals to public scrutiny and comment. The criteria, revised regularly, allow about 20 per cent within a product category to carry the environmental seal of approval.

"The whole objective is to move the marketplace," explains Polak, who semi-retired in 2007. "If 20 per cent of the products in any particular sector start getting some traction because of their environmental credentials, the people that are losing market share are going to wonder why, and, hopefully, they'll begin making environmental assessments and improving their own product."

Although Ottawa-based, the EcoLogo program has expanded to cover North America. Executive director Scot Case hangs his hat in Philadelphia. He estimates about 10,000 products now carry the certification, although the number changes as category standards are adjusted.

Companies pay \$1,500 to \$5,000 for initial verification and auditing, and an annual licensing fee based on product sales. EcoLogo is currently reviewing criteria for hard surface cleaners and is establishing standards for toys, "green" power and hand sanitizers.

Eco-labeling systems are proliferating. Canada's was the second in the world, and Polak is proud of it: "I really do believe the Canadian program is still the strongest, the most aggressive, the most innovative program out there."

