

Recycling Plastic Bottles: Your Call of Duty

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Americans purchase 34.6 billion plastic bottles each year, and throw away 30 billion of them. Plastic that is incinerated or that ends up in landfills contributes to air, water, and soil pollution, posing environmental risks and health risks, including possible carcinogenicity and hormone disruption. Informal observations of trash receptacles in classrooms, cafeterias, and gathering spaces led our Health Promotion Strategies class to believe that university students were contributing to this problem. We saw many plastic bottles thrown in trash cans despite the nearby presence of recycling bins. The purpose of this study was to determine if visual prompts, in the form of table tents, would increase the number of plastic bottles that were recycled in a university cafeteria. We conducted an observational study, using a pre-test, intervention, post-test design. Baseline data were collected for two weeks, with investigators observing and counting the numbers of plastic bottles that were trashed or recycled during specific times, days, and locations. We found that despite the presence of a recycling bins right next to the trash cans, 69% of the plastic bottles were thrown into the trash cans. We placed table tents on all cafeteria tables and bars, directing people to please recycle their plastic bottles; the table tents were in place and monitored for two weeks. Post-test data collection indicated that 61% of plastic bottles were now being recycled, a statistically significant, nearly doubling of recycling. We conclude that a very simple, very inexpensive intervention can bring about significant change in people's behaviors. Learner Objectives: Participants will be able to 1. Discuss the ubiquity of plastic 2. Describe the health and environmental consequences of not recycling plastic 3. Describe how a simple visual prompt can lead to behavior change