

New survey: Most South Africans find recycling too much effort

According to the results of a new survey run by PETCO, the majority of working and middle-class South Africans find recycling too much effort.



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“PETCO has undertaken extensive research to understand and unpack South African consumer perceptions and attitudes towards recycling,” said PETCO CEO Cheri Scholtz. “Our most recent research shows that recycling behaviour among South Africans is still quite limited. While the results show that recycling habits are becoming more mainstream, almost a third of the South Africans interviewed do not recycle at all.

“Many consumers are apathetic and indifferent about why they should recycle. Our research further shows that different economic groups are differently motivated to recycle.”

Close to 1,000 adults were surveyed – mostly from major cities in South Africa, but including peri-urban and rural areas – spanning living standard measures (LSM) one to 10. According to the research, respondents representing LSM one to three indicated that their incentives to recycle were economically aligned, with their experience of recycling being that it created jobs and was therefore good for the economy.

Respondents representing LSM four to 10 were, in turn, motivated by environmental factors. This, they indicated, was

because recycling minimised waste, saved energy and helped combat climate change. Their biggest barriers to recycling were a lack of facilities and space to store the items within the home and a lack of understanding of where to take recyclables once they were separated from general household waste.

There was additionally a high level of confusion around what the various polymer identification codes meant, the research indicates.

“Most consumers interviewed, across all demographics and age-groups, were simply not motivated to start recycling,” said Scholtz. “Even if they did want to start recycling, they didn’t know how to start, what to do with their recyclables, where to take them, or whether recycling was worthwhile or not [not knowing what is done with the post-consumer recyclables].”



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Findings from low-income respondents (LSM 1-3)

Respondents said they first became aware of recycling from waste collectors in their suburbs, as well as through friends and family. Major barriers to recycling, they said, was a lack of storage space at home and the absence of “easily accessible” recycling depots.

The group showed a decrease in recycling from PETCO’s previous survey in 2017. More than half of the respondents indicated that they did not recycle, and more than a third showed no interest to do so – either now or in the future. More than two-thirds also viewed recycling as hard work, indicating it was easier to just throw recyclable items away.

Respondents aged 18 to 24 in this LSM group made up the largest count of non-recyclers.

Findings from middle-income respondents (LSM 4-6)

The benefits of recycling, according to the middle-income respondents, were mainly environmental (53%), with economic factors such as job creation and the reuse of household items also listed as top benefits.

Although there was a positive disposition towards recycling, the levels of recycling were lacklustre, the research shows. Overall, almost two-thirds of these respondents did not recycle.

Findings from high-income respondents (LSM 7-10)

Among the high-income group, 43% of respondents claimed to be recyclers, 29% said they were “occasional recyclers” and 28% did not recycle at all. The main benefit of recycling as cited by high-income respondents was environmental, with 81% agreeing that recycling was “no longer optional”.

They cited traditional media sources (TV, newspapers, radio and magazines) as the main communicators creating awareness of recycling, with social media the next most prevalent information stream.



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Education “of utmost importance”

“The need for greater recycling education is of utmost importance to turn this situation around,” said Scholtz. “Specifically, consumers do not understand how technologically advanced and sophisticated the PET plastic bottle recycling process in South Africa is.

“They are not aware that PET plastic is 100% recyclable when basic design principles are adhered to, or that recycled PET can be used to make many new products, such as stuffing for duvets and pillows, or polyester fibre for jeans and T-shirts, or serve as raw material for a brand new PET bottle.”

In 2018 alone 98,649 tonnes of post-consumer PET plastic bottles were recycled under PETCO’s watch, saving 612,000 cubic metres of landfill space and lessening the country’s carbon emissions footprint by 148,000 tonnes.

“Greater awareness should also be created around the fact that the lives of many South Africans are being changed for the better through the local beneficiation of PET bottle recycling in the country.”

Through PETCO’s efforts an average of 6.2 million PET plastic bottles were collected for recycling across South Africa every day in 2018, creating 68,000 income-generating opportunities for small and micro-collectors – up from the 64,000 total for 2017, Scholtz said.

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