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IN DEPTH: COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE QUARTERLY
Green building

Myths abound about recycling at office buildings

Commercial property managers can make recycling pay off with these tips

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Many property managers of office buildings view recycling as a necessary evil. Well, not evil exactly, but at least a minor annoyance. Recycling of office paper and cardboard is relatively cost-efficient and often desired by tenants, so property managers are willing to offer recycling for those materials. But recycling often seems to complicate things. Is office building recycling really worthwhile? What's the real story?

Here are five common misconceptions about recycling at office buildings, and tips for property managers who want to make recycling work for them:

Myth No. 1: Benefits from recycling are insignificant.

Not true. Cost savings alone make recycling worthwhile for many buildings. Recyclers pay for some grades of office paper, but what really adds up are the avoided garbage costs. For example, in 2002, Kitsap County government offices reported savings of \$23,500 from office paper recycling.

In addition to the money you save, recycling has become a marketable amenity for office buildings in the Pacific Northwest. Many tenants appreciate a strong recycling program and see the value of moving into a facility that already has such a program in place. Potential tenants who are outspoken about their environmental ethic take this a step further and search for "green buildings" -- which should include a state-of-the-art recycling program.

And why is recycling marketable and popular? Because most people truly want to have as positive of an impact on the environment as possible. Especially here in the Northwest. Maybe it's because we see a lot of trees and water and mountains, and we think of recycling as a way to help preserve that.

Myth No. 2: If you do paper and cardboard, you've done it all.

Not really. Those are the two most visible materials for office buildings, but that's just scratching the surface. Consider these:

- Computer equipment. If you can offer a computer recycling event for your buildings, or even provide up-to-date information on computer recycling, your tenants will love you for it.

- Fluorescent tubes. You can save big money if you do a lighting retrofit to reduce energy costs, but then you have to recycle those old tubes. It's the law now.
- Cans and bottles. Employees really appreciate being able to recycle these. You can probably break even on this, or slightly reduce garbage costs. Be sure to include plastic bottles -- they are a growing part of the waste stream, and there's a decent market for them.
- Plastic bags and wrap. A market has emerged in Western Washington for waste plastic bags and wrap, including shrink wrap and bubble wrap. Some recycling vendors may allow you to throw clear "bags full of bags" into your paper compactor, which makes it easy.

Myth No. 3: Recycling is the tenants' responsibility.

It may seem simpler to just let each tenant take care of their own recycling. But for most materials, recycling is more efficient with a buildingwide or propertywide collection system. It's a basic economy-of-scale issue. It also gives you, the property manager, more control over the size, placement and number of collection containers, as well as when and how the service is provided.

Myth No. 4: Lack of space and other logistical problems make recycling impractical.

No. They shouldn't. Because of the cost savings and other benefits from recycling, it's almost always worthwhile to find a creative way to provide recycling in your buildings. The vendors that provide commercial recycling collection in the Puget Sound area are used to working in buildings with no loading docks, or buildings that are old, small and cramped, or new buildings with weird layouts. If you've got a logistical problem, there is help available -- from your recycling hauler, your local solid-waste management agency and others -- to help you resolve it.

Myth No. 5: Recycling and disposal are all there is to managing waste.

No. There's often a better way. The true goal is to prevent waste, and that makes even more economic sense than recycling. Waste prevention means reduction and reuse. Tenants can launch some waste-prevention efforts on their own, but property managers can lend a hand by providing info and making it easy for tenants. Examples of waste prevention include:

- Tackle the pallet problem. Work with vendors and others to make sure pallets left on the loading dock get reused -- so you don't get stuck with disposing of them.
- Reuse Styrofoam peanuts. You really don't want them in your garbage compactor or blowing around your parking lot. Luckily, there's a whole network of mailing businesses that will take these for reuse. Search for the one nearest you at: www.loosefillpackaging.com.
- Conserve paper. Help educate tenants about using less paper (by printing on both sides of a sheet, using e-mail instead of paper memos, etc.). It may

reduce your paper-recycling revenues slightly, but it will reduce your tenants' paper purchases even more, and they'll thank you for it.

- Exchange office supplies. Encourage tenants to set up areas in their offices where employees can exchange items such as binders, folders, mailing envelopes, in-boxes, etc.
- Donate office supplies and office furniture. For items that can't be reused internally and aren't worth the effort to sell, let tenants know about easy ways to donate them. Some charitable organizations will be happy to come to your building to pick things up.

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