



Sustainability

Convenience Store Industry's Take on Trash

Digging into consumer perceptions
and retailer observations about litter
and recycling at convenience stores.

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Convenience store industry's take on litter

Cleaning up and addressing litter throughout the United States is a \$11.5 billion-plus per year undertaking—and that's a conservative number, according to Keep America Beautiful.

For the U.S. convenience store industry, litter can also cost retailers in the form of denied applications for new store construction. When retailers seek permits to build new convenience stores, they sometimes face opposition from vocal neighborhood groups concerned about potential problems, such as unsightly litter that a busy 24-hour operation may generate. (“Don’t Be Trashy”; *NACS Magazine*, February 2017)

Many convenience stores agree that unsightly litter can be a liability to their brand, and have established procedures to manage it, with many focusing on a regular schedule of trash maintenance. For example:

- + At Kum & Go stores of West Des Moines, Iowa, formal shift checklists indicate how and when associates should take trash to the dumpster (including the appropriate frequency), inspect the parking lot for litter and maintain trash receptacle areas.
- + At QuikTrip of Tulsa, Oklahoma, store employees remove trash and litter from the interior and exterior of the store at least three times daily.
- + RaceTrac of Atlanta, Georgia, takes a hands-on approach where team members regularly walk the stores and parking lots during the first and second shifts to pick up litter.
- + Store associates at Rutter’s of York, Pennsylvania, check the trash at least once during the first and second shifts, both inside and outside the store. Rutter’s has also been voluntarily recycling since 2008 and partners with local hauler Penn Waste to include recycling messaging on on-site digital media, in-store messaging, billboards and signage. The retailer also uses eco-friendly packaging for its foodservice items.

Recent NACS retail member surveys have asked convenience retailers about the steps they take, or are considering, to implement sustainable practices like litter management and recycling. In addition, NACS consumer surveys reveal perceptions consumers have about convenience stores as they relate to litter and recycling.



TRASH: WHAT'S THROWN IN RECEPTACLES FOR RECOVERY.

LITTER: WHAT SHOULD BE THROWN IN RECEPTACLES, BUT OFTEN FOUND ON STREETS, SIDEWALKS, WATERWAYS, ETC.



Consumer contributions to the conversation

Convenience stores are a convenient place to shop, but they can also be convenient places for litter to accumulate, which can lead to NIMBY (not in my backyard) concerns at local zoning hearings.

An April 2017 NACS consumer survey identified two reasons why people tend to oppose a new convenience store in their neighborhood: litter or trash and noise. In 2018, when asked to rank which of the two is worse, two-thirds (65%) of consumers cited litter/trash over noise (35%).

Specific to trash, consumers believe that convenience stores are on par with other businesses, with 69% of consumers saying convenience stores produce the same amount of trash as other retailers. In other words, consumers seem to have the same expectation of convenience stores compared to other retailers or food outlets they frequent regarding trash. This can be viewed as an opportunity for c-store operators to show their customers that they are serious about keeping their communities clean.

NACS also surveyed customers about their behavior at the pump. When asked how often they toss their trash into an outside receptacle at the gas pump, more than half of all respondents (53%) report doing so either always or sometimes. This number grew dramatically among millennials, with almost three-quarters (72%) of 18-34-year-olds tossing trash in bins at the pump. When asked specifically if they cleaned out their car/emptied trash during their last visit, 44% of millennials said they spent their time filling up by emptying their car trash, compared to 27% of consumers age 39 or older. Survey responses suggest that younger customers are receptive to opportunities provided by retailers to properly dispose of trash, which can help create loyalty to a specific c-store brand among this demographic.

What about recycling? NACS consumer survey responses suggest that there is ample opportunity for convenience retailers to make it easier for customers to properly dispose of recyclable items like foodservice packaging and single-use plastics. Lack of awareness, or even availability, may be contributing to the fact that more than two-thirds of consumers (68%) say they rarely or never notice recycling bins near gas pumps.

When asked what they would do with recyclable items like aluminum cans and plastic bottles when no recycling receptacle is available, 51% of consumers say they would place them in the regular trash bin, 43% say they would keep them in their car until they found a recycling bin and 6% say they'll place it next to the trash, "hoping it will be noticed and recycled."

In terms of what consumers believe retailers can do to reduce their environmental impact, more than half said to add more recycling bins (54%) followed by use "eco-friendly" packaging (24%) for foodservice items, eliminate paper receipts (12%), and install solar panels or a green roof to collect rainwater (10%).

THE MOST FREQUENTLY TOSSED ITEMS IN TRASH BINS ARE:



PAPER (PAPER PIECES, RECEIPTS, STRAW WRAPPERS), NAPKINS



FOOD CONTAINERS OR WRAPS



CUPS/LIDS



CANDY/GUM WRAPPERS



AND BOTTLES.

April 2018 NACS Consumer Survey

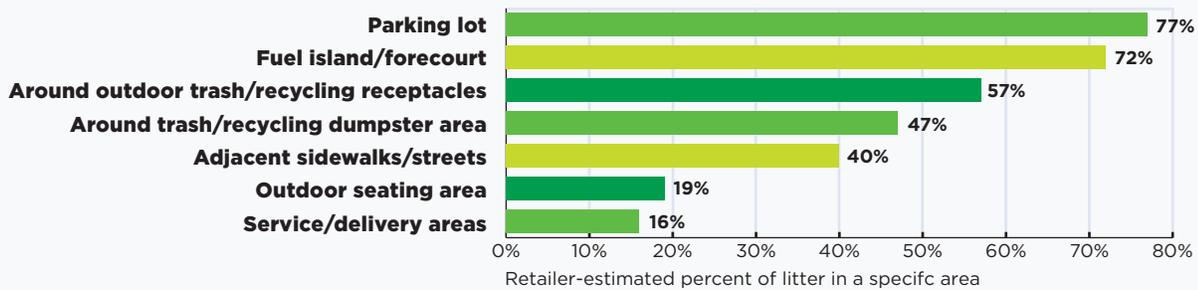


Taking care of trash at c-stores

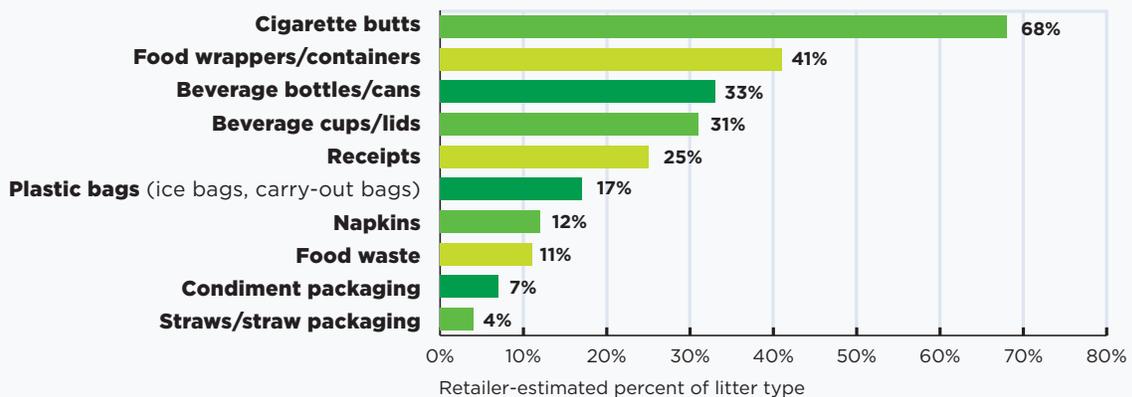
An April 2017 NACS retail member survey found that most retailers provide trash receptacles at the pump (78%) and near entrance doors (68%), suggesting that they incorporate litter and waste management as a best practice. Another industry best practice is to conduct a “trash audit” to better understand what types of litter are prevalent in and around a c-store facility, and where it’s found.

Specifics of litter on-site:

Retailers cited the areas outside the store where litter is most common:



They also cited the items littered the most outside of the store:



Of course not all trash makes it into receptacles. To help keep stores clean, more than one-third of retailers say they schedule employees to pick-up litter outside the store/on the property daily (36%), while 24% do so as needed and 13% do so hourly.

Specific to recycling, whether inside the store, at the pump or facility-wide, the 2018 NACS retail member survey found that the No. 1 reason retailers implement a recycling program is that it fits with the company’s values/mission (20%), followed by reduction of waste and hauling costs (19%), attracting customers (12%) and it’s required by law (10%). Many retailers also cited having back-of-house cardboard recycling.

THE 2017 NACS RETAILER MEMBER SURVEY FOUND THAT 41% OF RETAILERS SAY MOST OF THE CONTENT IN TRASH RECEPTACLES AT THE PUMP—BOTTLES AND CANS, FOOD CONTAINERS AND WRAPPERS FROM OTHER RETAILERS AND RESTAURANTS—IS GENERATED BY CUSTOMERS CLEANING OUT THEIR CARS.

Opportunities for convenience retailers

With 54% of consumers saying they'd like to see more recycling at convenience stores, there is an opportunity for the industry to improve current practices.

A September 2016 Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) report by Adam Hammes, former manager of sustainability at Kum & Go and founder of the Iowa Sustainable Business Forum, suggests that the most successful placement for a recycling bin is at the pump.

“Why? Because people were a captive audience at-the-pump and already in the mode of cleaning out their car if they had any trash. Walking to the store, inside the store, and getting a movie, people were already thinking about something else and not paying attention to their surroundings,” per the report.

A second finding from the AASHE report found that contamination was a huge issue at test sites where the recycling bin was placed on the opposite side of the gas pump than the trash can. The solution: Place the bins next to each other. “Make the choice convenient. Don't expect or require [customers] to look in two different locations to get rid of something they don't want. Put the recycling right next to the trash every time,” the report suggests.

The color of the recycling bin should be considered, per the AASHE report. For example, keep the regular trash receptacle black and use a blue-colored bin for recycling.

The opening of the recycling receptacle will also help reduce contamination. The AASHE report found that most of the recycling materials in receptacles at the pump came from cans and bottles. A bottle-shaped bin with small, round opening will correlate with the type of item that should be recycled, therefore eliminating consumer confusion. “Trash can be many things, but don't make the opening too large, because it encourages people to do a walk-by toss.”

NACS, through its partnership with Keep America Beautiful, provides guidance for convenience stores to improve their litter management and recycling efforts. Several resources are available at www.convenience.org/kab, including worksheets that can help retailers conduct an audit of litter in and around their property, and a checklist to help with trash and litter management.

As more convenience store customers continue to pay greater attention to sustainable business practices, convenience store operations have a great opportunity to be responsible community leaders by incorporating visible and convenient litter and recycling management programs.



CONVENIENT AND COLOR CODED:

PLACE TRASH AND RECYCLING BINS NEXT TO EACH OTHER TO MAKE THE CHOICE CONVENIENT. KEEP THE REGULAR TRASH RECEPTACLE BLACK AND USE A BLUE-COLORED BIN FOR RECYCLING.

Key Insights:

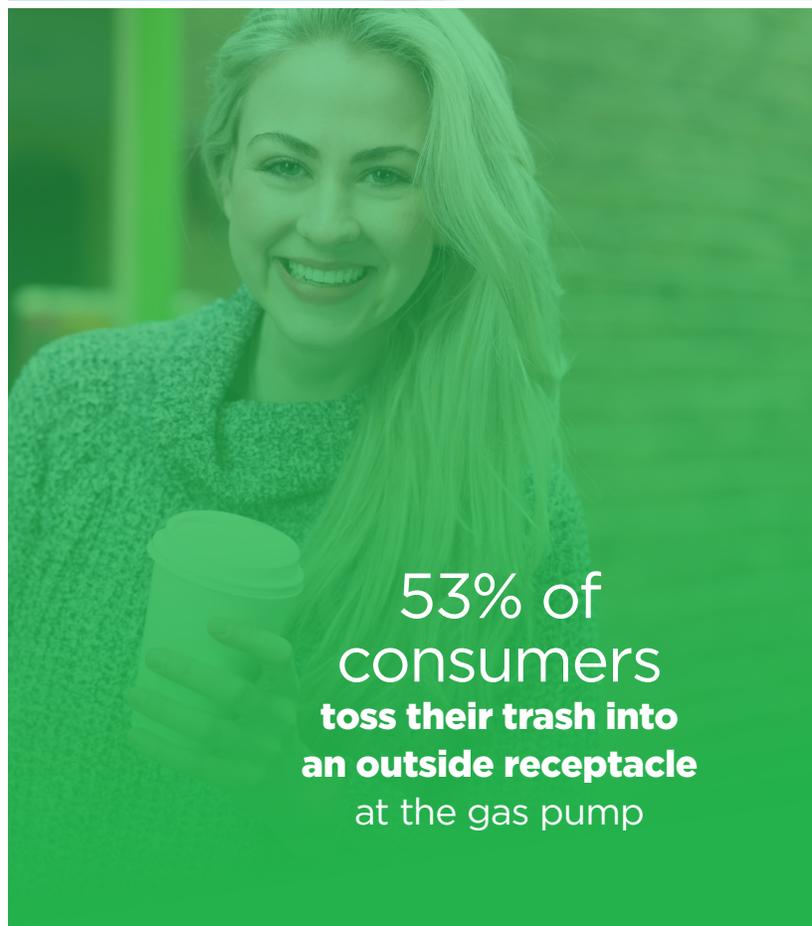
41% of retailers
say **trash at the pump comes**
from customers cleaning
out their cars



43% of consumers
would **keep**
bottles & cans
in their vehicle until they
found a recycling bin



20% of
convenience
retailers
say their **recycling program**
fits their company's
values/mission



53% of
consumers
toss their trash into
an outside receptacle
at the gas pump

Sources

“Don’t Be Trashy”; *NACS Magazine*, February 2017 (www.nacsmagazine.com)

April 2017 NACS Consumer Survey

PSB conducted online interviews from April 4-7, 2017, among n=1,104 American adults who purchase gasoline for a vehicle, such as a car, truck, or van at least once a month. The margin of error for this study is +/- 2.95% at the 95% confidence level and larger for subgroups. Some percentages may add to more or less than 100% due to rounding.

April 2018 NACS Consumer Survey

PSB conducted online interviews from April 10-16, 2018, among n=1,501 American adults who purchase gasoline for a vehicle, such as a car, truck, or van at least once a month. The margin of error for this study is +/- 2.87% at the 95% confidence level and larger for subgroups. Some percentages may add to more or less than 100% due to rounding.

NACS Q2 2018 Retailer Sentiment Survey (85 total responses)

“Being a Good Neighbor: A Guide to Reducing Litter, Managing Trash and Encouraging Recycling at Convenience Stores” (www.convenience.org/kab)

“Campus Recycling: Six Lessons from a Gas Station,” Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education; (www.aashe.org/campus-recycling-six-lessons-gas-station)



About NACS

NACS (www.convenience.org) advances the role of convenience stores as positive economic, social and philanthropic contributors to the communities they serve. The U.S. convenience store industry, with more than 154,000 stores nationwide selling fuel, food and merchandise, serves 165 million customers daily—half of the U.S. population—and has sales that are 10.8% of total U.S. retail and foodservice sales. NACS has 2,100 retailer and 1,750 supplier members from more than 50 countries.

**FOR MORE
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