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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What Works

Color Your World: The San Francisco Recycling Center gussies up the globe with recycled paint By Paul Kilduff

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2006

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Color Your World

The San Francisco Recycling Center gussies up the globe with recycled paint *by Paul Kilduff*



Ousmane Sy (left) and Luke Barizon reprocess house paint at the San Francisco Recycling Center. The center donates some of the paint to developing countries.

Just about every American home has a collection of half-empty house paint cans lingering in its garage or basement. These remnants, often of noble experiments like brightening the bathroom with hot pink, are of no value to the current occupants. But how can they get rid of the aging paint? Most landfills in the United States do not accept liquids. And while many landfills will accept paint that has been turned into a solid (by mixing it with kitty litter, for example), the resulting cans of dried paint take up precious landfill space.

San Francisco residents now have a unique, environmentally friendly, and free paint disposal option. The San Fran-

cisco Recycling Center's Household Hazardous Waste facility, an employee-owned company that provides recycling services to San Francisco, not only recycles leftover paint, it also ships the reprocessed pigments to less-affluent parts of the world. Locals then use the high-quality paints to beautify schools, churches, health clinics, and other community buildings. The S.F. Recycling Center also benefits, because in many cases it is cheaper to ship the paint to other countries than to pay for its disposal here.

In 1995, the program donated its first batch of over 700 5-gallon buckets of paint to Tonga, which is east of Fiji in the South Pacific. Since then, the leftovers of San Franciscans' house-painting adventures have made their way to San Salvador, El Salvador; Tepatitlan (or Tepa), Los Cabos, and Santiago, Mexico; and Segou, Mali. From these points the paint has been distributed to dozens of other locations.

Mixing It Up

The S.F. Recycling Center uses each of the hundreds of paint cans that it receives every day. The center first separates oil-based paints from latex-based forms, dispatching the oil-based paint to companies that use it to generate electricity. It then identifies the 30,000 gallons of latex paint it receives annually as either salvageable or beyond recycling. It turns the 20 percent that is too moldy or rusty to recycle into binder for cement.

The center then pours the latex paint that can be reused over a screen into one of three 55-gallon drums. Blues, grays, and greens go into the "cool" drum; reds, tans, and browns are destined for the "warm" container; and beige hues are poured into the "off-white" barrel. These three categories can be mixed into many more colors.

The end product – hundreds of 5-gallon buckets of house paint – is available free of charge to San Francisco residents. But it goes wanting, because people assume that the recycled paint is of lower quality than virgin paint. They are mistaken, says Paul Fresina, who oversees the paint recycling facility. Because aged paint has developed a higher solids content over time, it actually covers better than virgin paint.

Sharing the Wealth

Rather than wasting the reclaimed paint, the mostly immigrant employees at the S.F. Recycling Center suggested

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- Let employees lead charitable programs
- Set ambitious environmental goals
- Dispel myths about recycled products



donating it to their home countries. But sending free house paint to needy parts of the world proved far from straightforward. When center worker Humberto Quinonez was arranging to ship paint to Cabo San Lucas, Mexican officials wanted the center to pay \$7 per bucket in taxes. Luckily, Quinonez's brother-in-law knew a local secretary of education, who convinced the government to pay the taxes out of its own budget. "That's how Mexico works," says Quinonez.

Ousmane Sy faced different bureaucratic hurdles when he attempted to send paint to his hometown of Segou. Some officials worried that the paint donation was a trick by Americans to dump hazardous waste in their country. But in a country where a \$10 5-gallon bucket of paint equals half the monthly salary of most college-educated workers, Sy's countrymen were happy to work something out to get the paint. Sy asked a friend, local English teacher Mohamed Diallo, to translate into French the material safety data sheet, which included a detailed description of the paint. A Mali customs official also opened and inspected some of the cans before they were allowed into the country. Upon its arrival in Segou, the paint was used to spruce up schools and a health clinic. "It had never been done before so there was a lot of suspicion, so you walk through all of those to make it happen," says Sy.

How much it costs S.F. Recycling to ship the reprocessed paint depends on its destination. In 2002, a container of 700 5-gallon buckets cost \$3,000 to ship to Los Cabos. In 1998, a similar shipment to Mali in southwest Africa cost \$7,000. In both cases, S.F. Recycling says that it, not its local customers, picked up the shipping costs. Moreover, the company notes, sending paint to Mexico and other nearby countries is often cheaper than shipping it to a cement factory in Los Angeles, where it is assessed a \$130 per barrel disposal fee.

Recycling the Idea

The feasibility of replicating the S.F. Recycling Center's paint redistributing program remains open to debate. Many cities have hazardous waste drop-off centers, but most do not reprocess paint themselves. Instead, they pay other facilities to recycle or dispose of the paint. "I'm not aware of anyone else who's sending the paint abroad," says Lori Scozzafava, deputy executive director of the Solid Waste Association of North America, the industry's leading trade association.

Memphis is one city that is toying with the idea of reprocessing house paint. The city plans to open a hazardous waste facility within the next year, but has not yet decided what it will do with paint, which is already the single-most collected item at the city's biannual hazardous waste collec-

tion days. Andy Ashford, the city's recycling and composting administrator, is intrigued by the idea of sending paint overseas, but he is concerned with the fiscal impact. "It would be difficult for me to say definitely that we would do that. We would just have to take a look at what all would be entailed," says Ashford.

In San Francisco, the recycling center's commitment to social responsibility is what allows its paint program to thrive. "Recycling paint is another step in [our] quest to recycle 75 percent of all waste generated citywide by 2010, and reach zero waste to landfill by 2020," says center spokesman Robert Reed. "Those are goals approved by the [San Francisco] Board of Supervisors, and we take our direction from the city."

In keeping with these goals, the recycling center also encourages residents to compost food scraps, yard waste, and other biodegradable materials in a curbside bin that is emptied each week, along with the trash and recycling bins. The center then supplements the mix with the food scraps of over 2,000 local restaurants, creating premium compost that is highly valued by California's Napa and Sonoma Valley vineyards. The center also wants to establish pet waste receptacles into which dog owners can put their animals' solid waste. The receptacles would then use the methane from the decomposing pet waste to generate electricity.

Whether other recycling and garbage companies decide to develop a paint recycling and distribution program ultimately depends on their adherence to the hierarchy of reduce, reuse, and recycle, says Fresina. "If you can't not create the waste in the first place, then reduce. If you can use it as-is, reuse it. If you can make it into something else, recycle it," he explains. "The last resort is landfill disposal because it wastes resources. So we try whenever we can – especially in hazardous waste – to be on top of that little pyramid as much as possible. It would probably be a little cheaper to just bulk it up and throw it in the landfill, but we can't."

While S.F. Recycling is proud to provide free paint the world over, it would rather that the paint industry adopt manufacturer responsibility principles. These principles, which are now taking hold in Europe, stipulate that stores take back consumers' unwanted or leftover products, including paint. "Unused paint, even a half-full can, should go back to the paint store. It might be just what the next person walking through the door needs," says Reed. "If manufacturers won't step up and participate in efforts to develop sustainable systems, society should mandate manufacturer responsibility to ensure protection of the environment for the future of our children and grandchildren," he says. □