Introduction

Since commissioning the inaugural State of Reuse Report in 2016, we have seen variations in consumer behavior across the reuse cycle—from how and why consumers donate items they no longer need or want, to why they choose to purchase, or not purchase, reused clothing and household goods.

In this year’s report, people consistently stated they are donating or finding ways to reuse goods. However, while conversations and research about clothing and textile reuse have increased, North Americans are still grappling to understand the ultimate impact of their massive clothing footprint and the steps they can take to reduce it.

The race to buy now and buy more is not only exhausting the environment of important resources, it is leaving consumers feeling overwhelmed by overflowing closets and a lack of space in their homes.

In fact, 46 percent of consumers reported feeling like they had “way too much stuff,” and 53 percent were driven to give items away because they have accumulated too much clutter.

While promising trends toward decluttering are on the rise, North Americans are still throwing away far more textiles and home goods than ever before. Each year, 26 billion pounds of clothing and textiles go to landfills—95 percent of which could be reused or recycled.

What many do not realize is that when an item is thrown away, it is not only the item itself going to waste, but the natural resources required to create it. This means 700 gallons of water for every T-shirt sent to the landfill, or 1,800 gallons of water for each pair of jeans.

Consumers must recognize that the most sustainable item is the one that already exists.

Methodology

To learn more about how consumers perceive and deal with “stuff” and its overall role in their daily lives, community and the environment, Savers/Value Village commissioned Edelman Intelligence to conduct a survey of 3,001 people age 18 or older from the general population in the U.S. and Canada, as well as oversamples of consumers age 18 or older in 3 key markets: Seattle (501), Toronto (500) and Vancouver (500). The survey was conducted online from March 15-22, 2018. The margins of error are calculated at +/-1.7 percent for the North American general population sample; +/-2.5 percent in country comparisons; and +/- 4.4 percent in metro area comparisons.

Note: “North Americans” refers to consumers in the general population in the U.S. and Canada, including generational, gender, and parent and non-parent comparisons.

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For progress to be made, findings from our third annual State of Reuse Report revealed the continued need for consumers to embrace the full cycle of reuse—to not only donate, but also shop for used or upcycled products. This year’s report illustrates key motivators for reuse, as well as opportunities for growth and education to take the cycle of reuse full circle.

Top findings include:

People are missing out on the full cycle of reuse.
While there is a consistent base of people (40 percent) who purchase pre-owned goods at least once every few months, 60 percent of North Americans are shopping thrift once a year or less.

Decluttering is a primary driver for reuse.
When it comes to consumers’ donating habits, the feeling of having “too much stuff” takes precedence. Physical reminders, such as running out of closet space, tend to inspire action and 53 percent donate when they feel they have accumulated too much clutter.

Shoppers seek savings and treasures.
57 percent of respondents say saving money is the primary reason they buy pre-owned goods, followed by the thrill of the hunt. 69 percent say buying pre-owned goods feels like finding hidden treasure and 77 percent have been surprised by the great used items they’ve found.

Closing the loop will require continued consumer education.
People don’t fully understand the impact their clothing and household goods have on the environment, as nearly one in five still throw reusable goods in the trash. Nearly half of respondents reported they were unaware that extending the life of a garment lowers its environmental footprint.

Education about reuse is key to these misconceptions.

For more people to bring reuse full circle, more convenient solutions are needed.
People are motivated by convenience during every phase of reuse—whether it is donating, recycling, reselling or purchasing used goods. 53 percent don’t like to dig through piles to find something they like while shopping. 80 percent travel 15 minutes or less to donate their unwanted goods. To encourage a positive behavior change, the evolving needs of consumers must be met.
People Are Missing Out on the Full Cycle of Reuse

The majority of people are donating or finding other paths to extend the life of items they no longer need—and that's a great start. But most consumers are missing out on the other half of the reuse cycle—purchasing or using second-hand goods. Since price is a key consideration when purchasing an item, second-hand should be top-of-mind for most shoppers in North America, posing another opportunity to educate consumers on the price savings of shopping for pre-owned goods.

What do people think they should be doing right now to save the environment?

Only 7 percent of people think they should be buying pre-owned clothing and household goods instead of new. 28 percent think they should be donating used items instead of throwing them away.

In addition to being easier on the wallet, the environmental impact of reusing goods presents a strong opportunity to inspire consumers to give second-hand shopping a try.

Taking reuse can have a dramatic impact on our collective environmental footprint over time—something that far too many consumers do not realize. In fact, extending the life of a garment reduces its environmental impact by 20 to 30 percent².
Decluttering is a Primary Driver for Reuse

The overwhelming feeling of having “way too much stuff” and physical reminders, such as running out of closet space, prompt 58 percent of people to take action and donate items they no longer need or want.

53% donate because they feel they have accumulated too much clutter

46% state they have too much stuff

21% donate when their closet is too full

Of those who donate their stuff...

Of those who aren’t donating...

But people aren’t just donating their items to charitable organizations; they are finding other ways to reuse goods.

32% give their friends and family first pick on their unwanted items

13% sell used goods via consignment or online marketplaces

Why aren’t people reusing?

While most people are finding more ways to extend the lifecycle of goods, there are still barriers that prevent them from fully embracing reuse.

13% throw things out because it’s easier

12% aren’t aware of how or where to donate or recycle

8% do not donate or recycle because it’s not convenient

8% think it takes too much time

Of those who aren’t donating...

Of those who donate their stuff...
Shoppers Seek Savings and Treasure

What motivates shoppers when they make purchasing decisions? When forced to choose, price outweighs other factors related to longevity of a product and environmental impact.

Price is more important for people shopping for clothing and textiles, while longevity is slightly more important when deciding to purchase outerwear, household goods and electronics.

But there is also another motivator to shop second-hand, and that's the thrill of the thrift hunt.

While shopping online continues to grow, the desire to find hidden treasure and a good bargain is still driving second-hand shoppers to brick-and-mortar locations.

69% of people say saving money is the primary reason to buy used goods.

57% of people say finding hidden treasure feels like the thrill of the thrift hunt.

67% say buying pre-owned goods feels like finding hidden treasure.

19% prefer to shop in-person at their local thrift store.

77% have been surprised by the great second-hand items they’ve found.
Closing the Reuse Loop Will Require Continued Consumer Education

Strides toward sustainability are being made, particularly in how we dispose of food, plastic and cans, but there is still a long way to go to engage consumers in the full reuse cycle while helping them to understand their clothing footprint and how it affects the environment.

People don’t know what happens to the things they throw in the trash:

- 35% believe their clothes decompose naturally
- 28% think their clothes contribute to gas emissions when thrown out
- 28% think donating their used clothing and goods rather than throwing them out is the most important thing they can do
- 53% think recycling cans, paper and bottles is the most important thing they can do right now to save the environment
- 61% falsely believe that taking a 10-minute shower every day for a month wastes more water than creating 10 new cotton T-shirts
- 63% falsely believe that leaving the lights on for one night wastes more energy than creating one new pair of jeans
- 49% did not know that extending the life of a garment reduces its environmental impact
- 64% think it only takes 2 years for a synthetic T-shirt to decompose (in reality, textile decomposition takes over 40 years)
- 64% did not know that extending the life of a garment reduces its environmental impact

And, they don’t understand that through reuse they can help lower our collective clothing footprint. It is clear more education about reuse is the key to changing behaviors.
For More People to Bring Reuse Full Circle, More Convenient Solutions are Needed

People are motivated by convenience during every phase of the reuse cycle, whether it’s recycling, donating, reselling or purchasing second-hand goods.

To encourage change, donating and buying second-hand goods should be easy and accessible.

Convenience is one of the top five reasons people choose to donate their clothing.

More than half agree they would support recycling bins conveniently located around the city to help reduce the amount of waste going to landfills.

80% will drive 15 minutes or less to donate their unwanted stuff.

50% +

53% don’t like to dig through piles to find something they like.

25% would shop thrift more if they knew they could find designer pieces.

42% would shop thrift more if they knew there was a good selection.

Thrift stores can promote the reuse cycle by offering a great selection and shopping experience.
Style Comes Full Circle

From the moment an item is created, to the life it lives in our closet, to the day it is discarded, we as consumers are in a position to make more responsible choices at every phase to lower our environmental footprint.

Phase 1: Production

To make one cotton T-shirt, it takes 700 gallons of water. To make one pair of jeans, it takes 1,800 gallons of water, 400 mega joules of energy, and 71 pounds of carbon dioxide. 6 in 10 people think taking a 10-minute shower every day for a month uses more water than making 10 cotton T-shirts. 6 in 10 think it takes more energy to leave the lights on overnight than to make a pair of jeans.

Phase 2: Life in our Closet

Compared to 15 years ago, the average person buys 60% more items of clothing every year and keeps them for about half as long, generating a huge amount of waste. 30 percent of people report getting rid of their clothing in less than 2 years; 76 percent will get rid of an item in 5 years or less. People get rid of their shoes more frequently: 44% in less than 2 years and 85 percent in 5 years or less. 76% get rid of their jeans in 5 years or less.

Phase 3: End of Life

An average North American throws away approximately 81 pounds of used clothing per year. 1 in 5 North Americans report they are still throwing out their clothing, rather than giving them a second life.

And that’s why we encourage people to Rethink Reuse.

Style comes full circle.
About Value Village™

The Value Village™ family of thrift stores, operating under the Value Village®, Savers®, Unique®, and Village des Valeurs® brands, is a purpose-driven thrift retailer offering quality used clothing and household goods at over 300 stores in the U.S., Canada and Australia. We got our start more than 60 years ago from a commitment to reuse and supporting local communities.

We purchase pre-owned clothing, household goods and textiles from nonprofit organizations to help support their charitable missions, and through our stores, extend the life of used goods and reduce what ends up in the landfill. Over the past 10 years, the Value Village family of thrift stores has purchased more than $1.4 billion of clothing and household goods from our nonprofit partner suppliers—revenue that helps to advance their missions, empower their causes and serve a wide range of local community needs.

In the last year alone, we have helped divert more than 700 million pounds of material from landfills. In 2017, our stores repurposed hundreds of millions of items, including 265 million tops, 30 million shoes, 71 million pairs of pants, 18 million coats, 26 million dresses and 32 million accessory items.

Value Village recognizes the power of ensuring items that come through our doors reach their full potential and are given a second chance in our stores. We also work to extend the life of reusable goods that have not sold in our stores, and have dedicated an entire division of our company to forming reuse and recycling partnerships around the globe. Items that cannot be utilized in their current state can be re-purposed by our reuse partners or recycled for materials—including some textiles that can be broken down for insulation.

Value Village works to find new opportunities to inspire shoppers to think differently about reuse through thoughtful community programs, cross-sector collaborations, research and public awareness campaigns.

To learn more about Value Village’s commitment to reuse and local communities, visit rethinkreuse.com.

Endnotes


3 Average American shower uses 2.1 gallons/minute. 2.1 gallons x 10 minutes = 21 gallons. 21 gallons x 30 (days in a month) = 630 gallons.


5 Assuming 20 - 100 watt lights bulbs on for 8 hours. 100 watts x 20 bulbs = 2,000 watts/hour. 2000 watts/hours x 8 hours = 16,000 watt*h. 16,000 watt*h = 16KW*h.


Thanks for letting us share our State of Reuse Report with you. We’d love to hear any feedback you might have on how we could continue to improve. Reach us at impact@valuevillage.com.