



COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK

# Organize a Consumer Survey



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# Organize a Consumer Survey

Earth Day Canada presents the *Organize a Consumer Survey*. It's your guide to learning how to become environmentally responsible consumers.

Note: This project is designed to be used in conjunction with your CAN manual. The Project Planner Pack may help you as well.

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## About Us

Earth Day Canada facilitates positive environmental action.

Earth Day Canada is a national environmental charitable organization that provides youth and community organizations, schools, businesses, government departments, and individual Canadians with an opportunity to make a positive difference. Our national network includes thousands of community organizers in every sector—all working for positive change.

Operating year-round, Earth Day Canada's mission is to improve the state of the environment by motivating and helping individual Canadians just like you to take positive environmental action. We offer interactive programs, a free community Earth Day/Earth Week public Events Calendar (available in March and April), and information and tools you'll use again and again.

Earth Day Canada is the national organizer of Earth Day/Earth Week in Canada. April 22 is International Earth Day—the largest environmental event in the world. Every year, millions of Canadians join people in about 100 countries in positive environmental action. This popular event has grown into Earth Week in Canada to accommodate the scores of events that take place across the country.

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## Organize a Consumer Survey

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# Goals

Learn how to apply environmental knowledge and environmental values to make responsible purchasing choices.

Learn about and support the local stores that provide products, services, and policies that aim to protect local and global ecosystems, conserve natural resources, and therefore demonstrate respect for the environment.

Inform other stores of your environmental purchasing criteria to encourage them to stock products with a lower negative environmental impact.

# Challenge

## Think about...

- Once we use up non-renewable resources (such as oil, natural gas, and old growth forests), they will be gone forever.
- We expend a significant amount of energy and labour to extract natural resources to make into products. Does the quantity of natural resources we obtain justify and make up for the amount of resources (labour, money, etc.) we expend in the process?
- The way we use materials is often wasteful. Our heavy reliance on convenience items encourages manufacturers to design products for quick, one-time use and for easy disposal. We use energy and resources to make these products convenient, possibly damage the environment in the process, and without thinking we toss out the used-up products to spend eternity in a landfill or to be combusted in an incinerator.

Everything we buy, use, eat, and throw away comes from nature. The natural resources used to make products and packaging are extracted from the Earth through mining, logging, farming, fishing, or drilling. Unfortunately, the entire life cycle of products can have harmful environmental impacts.

## Damage to the environment can be caused by:

### 1. the ways we obtain materials

Resource extraction (e.g. oil drilling, forestry practices, natural gas pipelines, etc.) disrupts the Earth's ecosystems. Obviously, if we are to use these products, we must accept that the environment will be affected; however, it's the degree of negative impact that causes concern. Sometimes,

## FAST FACTS

- **4.5 million tonnes of packaging waste was thrown out in 1990—about 40% of that came directly from households (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, FCM).**
- **The average Canadian family discards just under half a tonne of packaging a year (FCM).**
- **In 1990, 54% of all consumer and industrial packaging was reused, 13% was recycled, and 33% was sent for disposal (FCM).**
- **Although Canadians may reuse plastic and paper bags, they eventually send them to landfill or incinerators because:**
  - **recycling facilities may not exist in their communities**
  - **the plastic may be mixed with other materials, such as paper and/or metal, making it non-recyclable**
  - **they choose to not recycle**

these processes are executed carelessly, causing more damage than necessary to ecosystems.

What's more, converting raw materials into useable products requires mechanical processes that use energy and that create waste, and air and water pollution.

### 2. the products themselves

The ingredients in a product can hurt local and global ecosystems. Remember CFC's (chlorofluorocarbons)? It was discovered that CFC's in aerosols and refrigeration systems were hurting the ozone layer.

We need to investigate the products that have harmful effects on the environment, and we need to investigate their alternatives.

**3. the ways we use or misuse products**

The handling (transportation) and the use of products significantly affects the environment. For example, if large oil tankers leak or spill oil, the oil can cause great harm to wildlife and ecosystems.

Another example: the use of household products with hazardous ingredients affects both the health of the user and the natural ecosystems the user lives within.

**4. the ways we dispose of products**

The disposal of products as a significant environmental issue is finally coming to the attention of most consumers. Here are some of the environmental problems that are caused by the way we dispose of products:

a) Landfills act as huge natural preservation bins for products that can have a negative impact on the environment from the time the landfills are built to years after they are closed. Within landfills, products can leach\* out their ingredients, recombine into new substances, compost anaerobically (decompose without air), or remain intact.

\*Leachate is a liquid composed of chemicals and other dissolved components of garbage in a landfill. Leachate travels through the landfill and seeps through the layers of garbage. Sanitary landfills are designed to capture and treat leachate.

b) Incinerating products and packaging raises the issues of air pollution, ash disposal in landfill (ash may contain hazardous chemicals), and the unnecessary waste of resources that could be recycled into new products.

## Solution

This booklet aims to teach you how to learn more about the products in your community so that your group can help make a positive difference.

You will learn and practise responsible consumerism. (We know this sounds complicated, but it's not.) Being a responsible consumer simply means making educated purchasing choices. It means choosing products that have a lower nega-

tive impact on ecosystems to conserve natural resources for present and future generations.

By flexing our consumer muscles we can make a big difference. Individual and collective actions can influence the types of products that manufacturers produce, the implementation of store policies, and the purchasing habits of businesses, organizations, friends, families, etc.

## General Needs

NEEDS	INSTRUCTIONS
1. The desire to change your shopping habits	This is crucial to the exercise.
2. Resources	Obtain information from product manufacturers and your public library. See Information Sources section.

**NEEDS**

**INSTRUCTIONS**

3. A list of materials accepted in local recycling program(s)

Obtain this information from your local Public Works Department or waste hauler. Note: Recycling programs are specific to each region or municipality. Many products bear the recycling loop logo, but facilities that accommodate this material must exist in your community for it to be recycled.

Recycling programs are subject to constant change as new technologies develop. Stay up to date on what is accepted for collection and how it must be set out.

4. A list of cruelty-free products

Refer to the Information Sources section for a partial listing of organizations that provide lists of companies and/or products that do not use animals for testing products and do not use animal-based ingredients in their products.

## PHASE I: How to be an Environmentally Responsible Consumer

You can research a product’s ingredients, its manufacturing process, and its disposal impacts. Use the information you gather to assess the negative and

positive environmental impacts of products.

The questions below will guide you in your research stages.

**LABELS: Read labels carefully, and consider the listed ingredients, the terminology used, and the manufacturers’ claims.**

**a) Ingredient listing**

Does the label provide enough environmental information to help consumers make a decision if they want to purchase a product with a lower environmental impact? Are the product’s ingredients listed on the label?

Research the product’s ingredients:

- What are the chemical ingredients and what do they do? Investigate chemical names or general terms, such as *natural*.
- To obtain information about the ingredients, contact the retailer or manufacturer.
- Research the material in the library, or contact relevant associations. Refer to the Information Sources section for recommended books and organizations.

**b) Terminology used**

What exactly is meant by the ecojargon on the product’s label? Find out how the manufacturer interprets these and other environmental terms:

- natural
- environmentally friendly
- environmentally safe
- recycled paper
- 100% post-consumer waste
- biodegradable
- green product

**c) Manufacturers’ claims**

Look for specific information, such as no phosphates, no chlorine, no animal products and no animal testing.

Watch for claims that may try to mislead consumers into thinking that the products are *environmentally friendly*. The product may not have a relationship with the claim being made. A product may never have had or have needed the specified ingredients or testing to begin with; therefore, the manufacturer may be making statements which have no relevance to the product.

#### d) Recycling logos

Does the product have recycled content? Is the product recyclable? To find out, look for the loop.



The loop with arrows is called the *mobius loop*. Because it is not trademarked, this symbol is on a variety of products and is used in a variety of ways.

By itself, the mobius loop is generally accepted to mean recyclable. Some manufacturers include the important note *where facilities exist* beneath the loop.



10% Post-consumer waste

This means the item has recycled materials in it, and the number in the centre tells you how much of it is recycled material. Below the symbol, it should explain what the recycled material is if it's not obvious.

In this example, the loop tells you that 50% of the bag it was printed on was made from recycled paper. 10% of that 50% is made from post-consumer recycled paper. Post-consumer means that the material was already part of a product that was used by someone, and then recycled.



The Environmental Choice<sup>™</sup> Program is an eco-labelling program that helps consumers identify products and services that are less harmful to the environment. The EcoLogo<sup>™</sup> is the Program's symbol of certification.

The EcoLogo is an official mark of Environment Canada. A product or service may be certified because it is made or offered in a way that improves energy efficiency, reduces hazardous by-products, uses recycled materials, or because the product itself can be reused.

#### Can I Recycle This?

To answer this question, you need to know what the product and its packaging is made of, what can be recycled in your community, and where the material is collected for recycling.

##### 1. What is the product and its packaging made of?

Be aware of products that contain combinations of various materials. Metal parts and aluminum foil are often combined with plastics to make product packaging. This can render the item unrecyclable. Some parts of plastic containers can be made of different plastics, or the lid may be made of a different plastic than the plastic in the bottle, or the bottle may have a different plastic bottom than the plastic used to make the sides. (Yes, this can be very confusing sometimes!)

##### Common materials to identify:

There are many recyclable materials; recyclable materials found in most household products are listed below.

- Steel
- Aluminum
- Glass: Some recycling collection programs may specify the colour of glass that they collect. If you would like to know more about glass and the differences between colours, contact your Public Works Department or the Consumers Glass company.
- Paper (boxboard, newspaper, fine, corrugated cardboard, etc.)
- Plastics: You can identify plastics by the SPI code. The SPI code is a number within the mobius loop—it's usually on the bottom of the container—that identifies the plastic type used to make the container. This numerical code was agreed upon by plastic manufacturers so that everyone could easily identify different types of plastics.

If you can't find the SPI code, then examine the container's physical characteristics to determine the plastic type. For more information, contact the Society of the Plastics Industry for a complete list of SPI codes. Refer to the Information Sources section.

Is the product made from recycled materials? To find out if the product is made from recycled mate-

rials, look for the mobius loop that indicates its recycled content (as described above). If there is no loop, the label may have the description of the recycled content in the text.

What is the percentage of recycled content, and of that, how much is post-consumer? A lot of the recycled content marked on labels includes the extra material that is taken from the manufacturers' production line and re-processed through.

It is still difficult to find products made with 100% post-consumer recycled materials. Sometimes this is due to technological limitations and quality concerns.



**2. What can be recycled in your community and where is recyclable material collected? Contact your Public Works Department for this information.**

***e) Is the product compostable or biodegradable?***

Ask: Where will this product be disposed (in a landfill, down the drain, etc.)? Can the product decompose there? Does the label indicate how fast the product will break down and under what conditions?

***f) Where was the product made?***

Support Canadian-made products. Be aware of non-renewable resource consumption issues for products made in developing countries, such as the destruction of tropical rain forests to make wood products.

***g) Packaging***

How much packaging and what type of packaging does the product have? It's obvious that packaging is designed to protect the product and to sell the product. The importance of selling a product through its packaging has become so important to some manufacturers that they ignore the issues of excess packaging and the waste of resources.

***h) Bulk quantities***

Bulk products use up less packaging. Is the product available in large (bulk) amounts? Can you refill your own containers with a desired amount of product?

## Transporting your purchases

There are several ways to transport purchases from the store to the desired location. Using plastic bags to contain and transport small quantities is a common method. Large items or large quantities of items can be packaged in a number of ways, depending on the characteristics of the item.

Think about the environmental impacts when considering your choices of transport containers (e.g. bags, boxes) and modes (e.g. truck, plane, bike courier).

For example:

- Is the container reusable? How many times can it be reused?
- Is the container made from a renewable resource?
- Is the container recyclable?
- Is the container made from recyclable material?
- Which transportation method is both energy efficient and convenient?

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## Advertising

Examine commercials and other forms of advertising that make environmental claims. How does the claim relate to the product? How does the claim influence your use of the product? Does the product have any negative environmental impacts?

Some advertisers seek to attract consumers with images of the natural environment alongside their product in advertising campaigns. If an environmental issue is directly addressed in a commercial, always seek other sources of information and/or alternative viewpoints before making a purchasing decision.

Be aware that many people—including advertisers—confuse the terms *recycle* and *reuse*. Reuse is important for waste reduction. Simply put, reuse saves resources: A product is used again in its original form. Recycling is significantly different; it reprocesses a product into a form so its materials can be used to make a completely new item.

It's becoming much easier to find products that advertise a recycled content; however, we need to examine the source and the content of the recycled material. Manufacturers can use two types of recycled material. The first type comes from the manufacturing process where excess material from a production line is collected and put into the production process to make another product (i.e. the material never reaches the consumer).

The second type is collected from recycling programs (such as those in homes and offices across Canada), processed into a marketable form,

and purchased by manufacturers to make a new product (i.e. material has been previously used). This is referred to as post-consumer recycled content. As consumers, we want to ensure that we purchase recyclable products to help build the market for items that are made from post-consumer waste. Only then can we expect to see products that advertise a high post-consumer content.

Consider how committed companies and organizations are to environmental values. Are their advertisements, labels, products, packaging, etc., made from environmentally responsible materials, such as recycled paper, vegetable-based inks, etc.?

Companies realize that environmental concerns are becoming a part of consumer purchasing decisions, and they're attempting to address these issues head-on. When you are presented with information about a product's impact on the environment, determine if this is the only impact. For example, a harmful household cleaner may now come in a new recyclable spray bottle, but the product itself may remain unchanged. Advertising may draw attention to one environmental issue while ignoring a more or equally important concern.

Environmental issues encompass a wide variety of concerns, including social justice. We've stressed knowing the product you buy, but you should also know the company you're buying from. Check into their hiring policies, purchasing policies, etc.

## The Products You Purchase

Evaluate the environmental status of the products and services you purchase. Are they:

- reusable?
- recyclable?
- disposable?
- made from recyclable materials?
- over-packaged?
- really needed?
- replaceable with a better product?
- made from non-renewable resources?
- made from harmful chemical ingredients?
- good for the environment?
- tested on animals?
- other

### Reduce: Do you

- take string bags and cotton sacks when you go shopping?
- reduce the amount you buy and throw away by reusing items?
- buy items with a lower negative impact on the environment? Check the product label for the EcoLogo symbol. This logo identifies products with a lower environmental impact.

- buy recycled and recyclable products whenever possible?
- buy second-hand items? (Always check that second-hand equipment meets current safety standards. Often, older items, such as child car seats, have safety specifications that change.)
- rent or borrow what you need, instead of buying new products?
- buy it only if you really need it?
- buy in bulk? This way you can buy only what you need, and it's cheaper!
- buy food that is organically grown (no pesticides or chemical fertilizers are used)?
- try to avoid convenience items that are buried in excess packaging?
- refuse excess packaging, such as extra bags, wrappings, and polystyrene?
- avoid making shopping a hobby or a pastime? If you're not in the store, you can't buy stuff you don't need.

*Note: Complete the Shopper's Audit that accompanies this booklet to further evaluate your consumer/environmental habits.*



## PHASE II: How to Survey Local Stores

Through this exercise, participants will learn if local store policies demonstrate a concern for the environment. For example, do they offer products and services with a lower environmental impact? Do they provide products with the EcoLogo?

### NEEDS

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Permission from store management to survey the store(s)	Write to the store managers for permission to do an individual or a group survey. Include the purpose of the survey, a schedule, the number of participants and their age levels (if students will be involved).
2. A list of products marked with the EcoLogo and the environmental criteria of the products	Contact TerraChoice Environmental Services Inc. 2197 Riverside Drive, Suite 300, Ottawa, Ontario K1H 7X3. Tel (613) 247-1900. Fax (613) 247-2228
3. Supervisors	Depending on the type of survey you're planning, supervisors may be useful to head groups and help with general organization.
4. Funding for possible expenses	Although paper, photocopying, writing tools, clipboards, transportation to and from the site, and postage should be your only expenses, your plan's complexity may add to this.
5. An action plan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare a survey plan and a timeline.</li> <li>2. Organize the survey so it can be executed effectively and be non-disruptive to the store's daily routine.</li> <li>3. Include time to interview the store manager.</li> </ol>
6. Preliminary visit	Before you chart your action plan, visit the store(s). Look at the store's layout, and consider how a survey would best assess the store's stock of consumer goods, services, and environmental attitudes.

### SURVEY TYPES

The following surveys are designed for large groups, small groups, or individuals. If you are working with students, consider adult supervision requirements. Participants can survey a supermarket or other retail stores.

#### **A. Group Trip**

Divide participants into small groups (3-5). Appoint each group an aisle, section, or product to assess. This will limit movement in the store.

#### **B. Individual or Group Survey**

If time, the size of the store, or scarcity of participants limits your surveying ability, have individual participants or groups survey the store, specific products, aisles, or sections on their own time.

**Type 1: Product Survey**

When surveying stores, compare well-known products with less well-known brand-name products. Choose at least three of the same product.

**Questions:**

1. Does the product have harmful ingredients? If so, what are they?
2. Does environmental damage occur during production or use?
3. Does the product have to be disposed of?
4. Is the product over-packaged?
5. Does the product contain recycled materials?
6. Is the product tested on animals?

From the simplest questions to the most technical, all are important. We randomly listed the above questions to provide you with an example to work with. We recommend that you design your ques-

**Sample Product Survey**

Product Name	Brand	Wt./Size	Price
Paper (note paper)	XYZ	542g	3.49

**Answers:**

- Q1. Yes: Chlorine
- Q2. Waste water containing various chemicals is released
- Q3. Yes, but it can be reused and recycled
- Q4. No
- Q5. Yes (10% post-consumer content)
- Q6. No

tions to focus on the environmental characteristics that participants are most interested in, such as packaging, processing, and advertising.

**Type 2: Store Review**

- Find the store that is the most waste responsible. For example, a store with a 3Rs Policy: reduce, reuse, recycle. Or, take a survey of stores that sell a particular type of product (e.g. office and school supplies), and see which store lets you purchase a set of supplies with the least amount of waste.
- Have participants assess and rate various stores' policies and practices:

**Does the store sell:**

- a. Items in bulk? If so, how many items?
- b. Organic fruits and vegetables?
- c. Meats without styrofoam and plastic wrap?
- d. Recycled paper products?
- e. Everyday items, such as toilet paper, in extra large (bulk) sizes?
- f. Products in packaging designed to refill old containers, such as laundry detergent?
- g. Product containers that can be returned for a refund?
- h. Toxic-free cleaning products?

**Grocery bags/packaging:**

- a. Can bags be collected for recycling at the store?
- b. Are they made from recycled material?
- c. Does the store charge for bags or offer a discount to consumers who bring their own bags?
- d. Does the store reuse and recycle its packaging (plastic and cardboard boxes)?

**Transportation:**

- a. Is public transportation available to this store?
- b. Does the store provide bike racks?

**Energy:**

- a. Does the store have energy-efficient lights?
- b. Does the store use chill-savers on freezers, etc?

**Optional:** Design your own questionnaire to ask specific questions about products and the store.

**For a simpler surveying method:** Don't use a questionnaire. Instead, have participants mentally survey products, services or store policies, and note the answers to one or more questions.

### Follow-Up Steps

Your method of surveying will influence your follow-up steps. You can analyze the findings in a variety of ways that can involve the whole group, individuals, or both. Use the following questions as guides for discussions:

- Was there a specific product manufacturer that displayed strong environmental values?
- If you surveyed more than one store, compare the differences and similarities.
- Were all products damaging to the environment in some way?
- Did this survey project change the participants' shopping habits?

Send a thank-you letter and a summary of your findings to participating stores. Emphasize positive actions; managers don't want to read a letter that is completely negative. It's important to let store managers know that consumers want products with a lower environmental impact.

Set up a display or organize an awareness campaign to inform others in your community and organization of your consumer survey's results. Write to local stores to inform them of your concerns, your purchasing criteria, and/or to praise them for their good efforts.

*What we buy is one of the ways we represent ourselves in society. Making a purchase is like voting. So vote green!*

## Information Sources

### Publications

Council on Economic Priorities. *Shopping for a Better World*.

Ethicscan Canada. *The Ethical Shoppers Guide to Canadian Supermarket Products*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1992.

Ontario Public Interest Research Group. *The Supermarket Tour: A Handbook for Education and Action*. Ontario: 1979.

Moore, Lappe Frances. *Diet for a Small Planet*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1971.

Pollution Probe Foundation. *The Canadian Green Consumer Guide*. Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 1991.

Check your local library and book stores for more books on this subject.

### Organizations

Environmentally Sound Packaging Coalition  
2150 Maple Street, Vancouver, BC V6J 3T3  
(604) 736-3644

The Society of the Plastics Industry of Canada and the Environment and Plastics Institute of Canada.  
5925 Airport Road, Suite 500, Mississauga, Ontario L4V 1W1 (905) 678-7748

Pollution Probe  
12 Madison Ave., Toronto, ON M5R 2S1  
(416) 926-1907

Your provincial Recycling Council

Consumers Association of Canada—Environment Committee  
234 Eglinton Ave. East, Suite 403  
Toronto, ON M4P 1K5  
(416) 481-6864

EarthSave  
P.O. Box 7266, Oakville, ON L6J 6L6  
(416) 537-7437

Earth Shoppers  
329 Eglinton Ave. East, Toronto, ON M4P 1L7

ARK II  
P.O. Box 687, Stn Q, Toronto, ON M4T 2N5

Canadian Federation of Humane Societies  
102-30 Concourse Gate, Nepean, ON K2E 7V7

Canadian Environmental Network (for a listing of environmental groups in your community)  
P.O. Box 1289, Stn. B, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5R3  
(613) 563-2078