

What Comes After Shopping?

Strategies for Fighting Climate Change, Creating a New Consumer Culture in NYC

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View the Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTqQzYiRMPs&t=47s>

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Introduction

Good evening. Tonight I'd like to share some ideas for addressing NYC's ginormous trash problems while fighting climate change at the same time. My ideas focus on one key idea: Let's create a new consumer culture that is less wasteful, less burdensome on our climate – and that will help all of us New Yorkers and city dwellers everywhere live a LOT better. Intrigued? Let's begin.

I'm Jacquie Ottman and I've been obsessed with trash since I made my first dumpster dive when I was four years old. This bookcase is one of my most recent finds. How many of you have more than one treasure of your own to report? Dumpster diving is just one way to acquire things without shopping. I think many of us would agree that shopping is one of the reasons why we have so much trash. So today I would like to ask what may sound like a heretical question to all of us Americans: *What Comes After Shopping?*

Many people now realize that we don't have to buy something new every time we need something. In fact, we don't have to necessarily *own* many of the things we use every day. Thanks to the internet, new technology and good old thrift shops and other means, we can simply use things owned by others or collectively within our communities. Given all the trash that NYC generates each day, and all the issues that surround it, including climate change, now is the time to talk about solutions.

Roadmap

Before presenting my ideas, I'd like to briefly review why NYC's now three-year old Zero Waste plan is meeting some bumps along the road to 2030 — and why we may need to come up with solutions beyond recycling. I'll end with some ways for all of us to get meaningfully involved in our roles as residents, consumers, citizens, and leaders in our community.

How Much Do New Yorkers Waste?

We New Yorkers generate 25,000 tons/ day of waste each and every day, to the tune of 6MM tons/ year. We generate half of this in our homes (“Residential Waste”). The other half (“Commercial Waste”) is generated by the City's businesses — but indirectly by us, too, in the offices we work in, the restaurants where we dine, the hospitals that put us back together again, and the bakeries that start in the wee hours to bake our morning. Each of us generates nearly one ton of this waste per year. *Who says one person can't make a difference?*

77% of NYC's Residential Waste is Recyclable

17% of all of the city's Residential Waste is recycled out of a possible 77%. So we have a long way to go! Another 17% is incinerated.

How many of you here tonite live on the West Side? How many on the East Side? The white DSNY trucks that pick up our trash don't stop once they leave our curbs! They take the trash directly to Newark where it is incinerated.

Pop Quiz: How many landfills do we have in NYC? Zero! How many incinerators? Zero!

So all of our waste must be exported out of the City. Whatever is not recycled or incinerated in Newark, is landfilled upstate and in ten other states — to the tune of \$420 Million/ year.

42% of NYC's Refuse is Organics

When you factor out the waste that we are recycling and just look at the 'Refuse' (that which we incinerate or landfill) — in other words, the equivalent of slicing open one of those black bags on the sidewalk — you'd find that 42% of what we throw away is food or other organic matter like yard waste and food soiled paper. (We don't know how much of this food is edible, by the way.)

What We're Really Throwing Away in NYC

Natural Resources and Pollution. Throwing away the food and all the rest of the perfectly good recyclable material is a waste of our natural resources, and creates pollution from the time the resources are mined to make products, to the pollution that's created to ship our disposables to a landfill and then to have toxics leach from landfills into underground waterways.



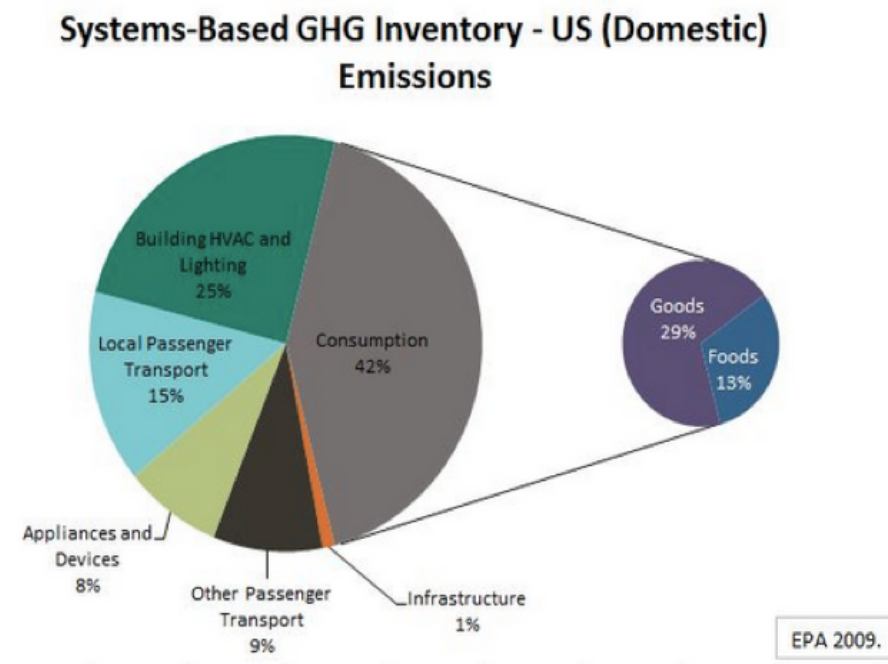
42% of NYC's refuse is food that degrades into landfills into methane, a potent greenhouse gas. (Source: DSNY 2017)

Ethical Issues. The waste is shipped mostly to poor counties that are willing to mortgage their futures and their kids health for money today. It also affects our marine life, particularly from plastics that don't break down on land or water.

Financial Risk. The recycling industry is now in turmoil because of China's ban on recyclables. The states we're sending waste to could soon hold us hostage. What programs will we need to give up if export fees rise to \$1 billion by 2030 on the current trajectory — After school programs? The Arts? Education?

Climate Change. Just collecting and then shipping our waste up and down the East Coast creates 2.2 MM tons of carbon/ year. All that food waste and other organics we're sending to landfills degrades into methane, a greenhouse gas that's up to 25 times more potent than CO₂. And when we throw stuff away, we're throwing away all the carbon that's embedded in products and food. Let's look at that more closely.

The U.S. EPA has found that the production of consumer goods and food generates 42% of greenhouse gas emissions. So, after switching to renewable energy, reducing our consumption is one of the best ways to address climate change, as well for managing all natural resources and keeping waste to a minimum.



New York's Zero Waste x 2030 Plan: Issues

To address these various solid waste and related issues, Mayor DeBlasio introduced on Earth Day in 2015, NYC's Zero Waste x 2030 plan. Good for him! Good for us! That makes us the largest city in America with a Zero Waste



plan, and puts us in company with other progressive cities like Seattle and LA. Its goal is to divert 90% of solid waste from landfill by 2030. It's an ambitious goal, (and as aspirational one) — but things are not progressing so well. Why?

1. A mixed record of progress on recycling. Further geographic expansion of the NYC curbside organics program is now stalled due to less than anticipated participation, and this affects economics. (Any area / building receiving service will continue to do so.) Recycling participation at NYCHA complexes is going slower than expected, as is recycling uptake within the NYC public school system.

Collection of electronics waste is going well, largely driven by the New York Statewide ban on electronics in the waste stream, in effect since January 2015. It is complemented by the City's e-waste "E-Cycle" pick up system in multi-family apartment buildings and various neighborhood drop-off programs.

However, clothing recycling is not keeping pace with discards, hence the 8% of the refuse stream represented by clothing, likely⁷ due to fast fashion trends and recyclers that refuse clothing that is not reusable/ re-salable.

2. Industry is not cooperating. This may not be surprising. Although many companies may want to run their businesses consistent with aggressive corporate social responsibility goals, at the end of the day, they are working with an entrenched economic system that rewards constant growth and short term profits. And industry puts up a good fight when bans or fees come up in the legislatures. For instance, New York City and New York State still struggle against industry to pass a ban or fee on plastic shopping bags. A ban on styrofoam was vigorously fought by industry for three years until it was recently upheld by a state judge.

3. Government has little no money for education and culture change; meanwhile, massive advertising campaigns continue to fuel consumption.

Four Solutions to New York City's Trash Woes

There are four main areas where we all in our roles as residents, consumers, and citizens/ voters and leaders can get involved to help address NYC's solid waste challenges:

1. Learn more about equity issues within the five boroughs of New York, in Newark where our waste is incinerated, and in the states where our waste is landfilled. One North Brooklyn City Council district processes 60% of all of NYC's waste and 70% of the organics.

2. Bring industry to the table; promote the notion of “Circular Economy.”

This can take the form of deposits and fees, bans and EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) policies which would require industry to take back their goods for recycling, repair and remanufacturing into new goods. ‘Right to Repair’ legislation has been introduced into the New York State Legislature as well as 18 other states.

More to industry’s liking, provide incentives to do what it does best: innovate, in the forms of technology (NYC’s waste stream is lighter now because digital has replaced newspapers) as well as designs and materials (lightweight, compostables, recycled content), and new business models that would allow them to profit from selling consumers less stuff. (More on this below.)

3. Put pressure on state and local lawmakers to align regulations and policies with Zero Waste goals.

We changed culture around smoking, and seat belts, we can do it with unnecessary consumption. Better integration solid waste issues within the City Council might help to get more traction for progressive zero waste policies. For instance, solid waste issues can be linked to climate resilience, health, environment, transportation, parks, and equity.

4. “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” (in that order); **in our own backyards, and influence others to do so.** Recycling comes last because even though it’s helpful, as a manufacturing process, it creates its own impacts. And, recyclability doesn’t fundamentally change consumer culture. We tend to buy the same types of items as we always have; indeed the fact that something like a Poland Springs water bottle is recyclable may give consumers ‘permission’ to consume it.

So we need to spend a lot more time thinking about how we can reduce waste and reuse more of what we consume. This will be the focus of the rest of my talk.

Reduce

Carrying reusables like bags, bottles, coffee cups et. al., is a great thing to do. So is repairing things. We need to keep our things in use longer — and we all can take easy to do actions on this by. Doing these things all helps to raise consciousness, and embed waste reduction into our culture.

Reuse, via ‘Sharing Economy’ Strategies

We can further reduce waste with the promise of even greater benefits, if we reused our things more, with the goal of using the stuff that's produced 'more intensively', so we can get the most value out of the resources and energy it took to produce them originally.

I see a particular opportunity here in NYC to reuse more stuff within our own buildings and neighborhoods through 'Sharing Economy' strategies:

Share, Swap, Borrow/Lend, Donate, Gift, Rent/Lease, and Buy and Sell things to each other!

A great example is relying on tool sharing libraries rather than owning many tools ourselves.



Borrowing tools from a lending library spares people from having to purchase and maintain tools.

Benefits of Sharing

Sharing can help New Yorkers live better. Think of opportunities to get to know the neighbors! Sharing can also help people save money on certain things and have more money to spend on other things that matter more, like education and health care, and a secure retirement. Sharing instead of owning can help people declutter. And we wouldn't even have to go out of our way to lure folks with the prospect of 'Saving the Planet'. They'll be drawn in by the lifestyle benefits.

Ways to Promote Sharing in NYC

I have been integrating sharing strategies into my own life and my Upper East Side apartment building for nearly a decade. Here's just a few examples of sharing that particularly intrigue me – and I they will intrigue you, too.

How about a Free Stuff Box or shelf? A no-cost way to promote the transfer of goods among apartment buildings, office, senior centers and dormitories.

Does your building have a library yet? During the tours of residential buildings that we've been conducting for the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board, we've been finding that many apartment buildings have a bookcase or shelf of books for all to share. Why



not other things?

Library of Things. Sacramento now has a Library of Things. Residents can borrow a guitar, sewing machine, cookie cutters, and many other things. Why not here in NYC? One day I'm going to walk into my 67th Street NYPL branch and borrow a pair of binoculars and a guide to the birds in Central Park.

Why not share a vacuum cleaner with the neighbors? I predict that one day we'll be sharing items like this in special closets in our buildings. Last year, I put a note under every door on my floor letting neighbors know what I was willing to share – and now Rita drops by every other Friday morning to borrow my Electrolux.

Got food that's about go to waste? Why not invite the neighbors in for a weekly "Leftovers Pooling Party" and create community by sharing recipes, and exchanging notes on the new restaurants and take-out places we tried recently?

Deposit extra food into a community refrigerator. Not up for a party? Community refrigerators are cropping up all over Europe and as far away as Saudi Arabia as a way of feeding the hungry. Think of the possibilities to save food in offices by devoting just one shelf in the fridge to sharing food that no one intends to eat. Just who's moldy sandwich is on that back shelf? No fridge? What about a Community Food Shelf of just dry goods??



(Photo: Free.go/Facebook)

How To Scale Sharing Economy Ideas

So, you may be saying these ideas are great, but where's the real impact? The impact comes when businesses see an opportunity to make money by bringing these ideas to scale. Zipcar started out as an initiative of an environmental group in Germany. Now it's all over the world – and all over New York because a businessman saw an opportunity to invest to make it accessible to everyone.

Ebay is a yard sale on steroids. Rent the Runway is doing for prom and



wedding dresses what the guys have always enjoyed via tuxedo rental.

And next up is Next Door.com. Have you signed up yet? There's Facebook for friends, LinkedIn for business contacts, and now NextDoor.com for the neighbors. It's the next big thing! (Buy the stock when it goes public!)

So that's a few ideas. Let's talk measurement.

How To Measure Sharing Economy Impact?

How should we measure how sustainable our lifestyles are? We already measure how much we recycle in NYC. And labels often tell us if products are made from recycled content, and how much. Why not look at what we reuse too? For instance...

Reuse Index. Why not measure how much of our consumption is composed of items that we are reusing instead of buying new? Think about all the items you came into contact with in the past 24 hours, including clothes. How many of these items did you buy new, and how many were previously owned by someone else?

Sharing Index. What percent of all the products that we use in our households over the course of a month are not owned by us, but shared amongst others in our buildings, or borrowed from the neighbors?

Product Longevity Index. In an era when much of what we buy lasts a maximum of six months and some things for less than a minute, let's measure how long a typical basketful of items that we buy here in NYC actually lasts. Product longevity is a function of the quality of what we buy, but it's also how well we maintain our things, and the availability of repair services, as well as the will to wear our clothes just a little while longer or to buy more classic styles.

Connectedness Index. How connected are we to our neighbors — the folks just on the other side of the wall, the folks we bump into on the street? Just how many of our neighbors do we interact with over the course of a month — or a year for that matter? Couldn't we all use some more friends? Especially the

Reuse Index

Percent of consumption that represents used versus new?

Product Longevity Index

How long does a 'basketful' of product last here versus other cities?

Sharing Index

Percent of products used in a month that are not owned but shared, borrowed, etc.?

Connectedness Index

of our neighbors each of us

millions of us here in NYC who live alone.

Conclusions

1. We live in a very wasteful city; and our waste is creating many issues.
2. We have a Zero Waste x 2030 plan in place that needs attending to, or we will put ourselves at risk in the future.
3. We can all do our part as individuals, as citizens, as consumers — and as leaders in our communities and buildings to tackle waste.
4. We need to get up to speed on the issues, and work together with all sectors to make lasting change through policy and innovation.
5. Sharing strategies can help us get beyond recycling. They can also help us to change our consumer culture and promote positive social change.

I'll end with a poem from my new book, [If Trash Could Talk](#).

A Poem: The Sharing Closet

One of these days the closet down the hall that's now marked 'Compactor and Recycling' will be labeled 'Sharing Closet'.

The trash chute will be boarded up. The closet will be freshly painted, smelling like new.

In that closet will be a Miele vacuum cleaner, an iron and ironing board, a 30 cup coffeemaker, a deck of cards, an espresso maker, and a toolkit. Residents will be free to borrow stuff as they choose, putting it back in a timely manner for others to use. The building — or Home Depot — will be responsible for maintaining the stuff.

And everyone will say 'Why didn't we think of this sooner?'

Thank you very much.

About the Author

Jacquie Ottman is on a lifelong quest to eradicate waste. At age 4, she dragged home board games from the neighbor's trash. In the 1970's she became the recycling czar in her NYC high school.

Since 1989, as an independent consultant, Ottman has been applying what she learned



about marketing at Madison Avenue advertising agencies to help businesses and the U.S. government's Energy Star label persuade Americans to select environmentally preferable products.

Today, she runs a website called WeHateToWaste.com, where she shines a spotlight on ideas from around the world that demonstrate how people can live what she calls “trash-free and happy, too.”

She is the founding chair of the Residential Recycling and Reuse Committee of the [Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board](#), a citizens advisory board on zero waste. Her committee is currently addressing the particular challenges of encouraging residents in multi-family buildings to recycle, compost and reuse.

The author of seven books, and articles too numerous to mention, her latest book is called “[If Trash Could Talk](#)”. It contains 60 poems, stories and musings that are designed to provoke, amuse, delight – and change consumer perceptions about waste.

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