

How to Talk About Plastics:

Many Happy Returns



UK Research
and Innovation



University of
Sheffield

**A
Guide
to Using
Language
Effectively
to Reduce
Plastic
Pollution.**

Why language matters

The way we use language reflects the way we think about the world, but the language we use also has the power to shape our worldview and the views and actions of others. The choices we make over the words we speak and write have material consequences. Changing how we talk about plastics can encourage more pro-environmental behaviour in ourselves and in others.

People produce and encounter language about plastics every day and in a wide variety of places: on packaging and labelling; in shops and supermarkets; in council guidance and information; in the media and advertising; on social media; and in everyday conversation. Reframing the language we use in all of these situations has the potential to change how we think about plastics, to encourage reuse before recycling, and to reduce plastic pollution.

With an estimated 8 billion tons of plastic currently in the Earth system, and around 10 million tons ending up in our oceans every year, it's time to rethink how we talk about plastics. Simple adjustments to our language can make a big difference and everyone has the power to influence change.

Many Happy Returns

This guide is based on research undertaken by a team of linguists on the ‘Many Happy Returns’ project at the University of Sheffield. The project ran for two years and examined over 4.5 million words of everyday language to understand how the language we use can influence how we interact with plastics. ‘Many Happy Returns’ was funded by the UK Research and Innovation Council.

For more information on the project and on the research which underpins this guide, go to:
<http://grantham.sheffield.ac.uk/research-projects/many-happy-returns-plastic/>

You can also read our latest publication - “‘I don’t think education is the answer’”: a corpus-assisted ecolinguistic analysis of plastics discourses in the UK’ - here:
www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/jwl-2022-0017/html

Don't use language to greenwash.

There has been a sharp rise over recent years in companies making false or misleading statements about the environmental credentials of their products and processes. This is increasingly being challenged in the courts and is likely to be subject to special legislation in the near future. This is our most important don't.

For more information, see the Green Claims Code:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-claims-code-making-environmental-claims



**Do
communicate
your values
and ethics
openly
and
honestly.**

Our research has shown that customers are wise to greenwash and that they appreciate honesty and transparency. Tell them about your concern for the environment and the practical steps you're taking to encourage plastics reuse and reduce pollution. Where there are limits to what you can do, acknowledge this honestly.

Don't rely on labels alone.

Research has shown that people spend on average 10 seconds or less reading labels on packaging. If you have a message to share, think about whether it can be understood in this short time, or whether another mode of communication might work better. Social media, email, and advertising campaigns all offer alternative means of communicating more complex messages.



**Do
keep it
simple.**

However you choose to communicate about plastics, make sure your messages are clear, direct, and easy to find.



Don't overdo it.

Our research has shown that customers are easily overwhelmed by too much green messaging and that this can lead to frustration and disengagement. Avoid mixing too many environmental issues together. Focus on easy actions customers can take to make a real difference to the problem of plastic pollution.



**Do
tell a
story.**

Stories aren't limited to literary texts or the tales we tell our children at bedtime. Research in linguistics has shown that stories underpin how we understand the world and how we use language. Think carefully about the stories your language tells.



**Don't
be a
hero.**

Our research has revealed that customers react badly to stories which portray retailers and manufacturers as the heroes. Take responsibility for your role in plastic pollution and avoid language which describes your organisation as 'helping', 'supporting', or 'providing' for customers.



Do
give
customers
agency.

Give customers the hero role in your stories. Be clear about the positive impact their actions can have and be specific about how they can do this.

Instead of: *We're helping our customers reduce plastic pollution by providing a refill-in-store scheme.*
Try: *Our customers are helping us reduce our plastic waste by using our refill-in-store scheme.*



Don't be afraid to use negative language.

Research has shown that negatively-framed language can be effective in influencing low-level, concrete actions. Blaming and shaming customers is not a good strategy, but using other negative language, such as 'Don't throw this bottle in the bin' or 'Stop wasting plastic', is more likely to have an effect on simple, everyday decision-making.



**Do
use positive
language in
the right way.**

Positively-framed messages have been shown to be most effective in influencing high-level reasoning and abstract thinking. Use positive language to communicate your ethical standing and environmental aims and to inspire people about your campaigns.

Try combining positive and negative language.

This approach can target both low-level and high-level reasoning. Use positive language to communicate broader messages or to inspire, but use negative language to affect decision-making at the point of action.

Reuse is
the new
recycling
[POSITIVE
FRAMING]

Don't get
caught out
without your
container!
[NEGATIVE
FRAMING]

Remember.

In the current climate crisis, it's easy for people to feel powerless or overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of environmental problems. Plastic pollution is one area where individuals can have an immediate and measurable positive impact.

- **Giving clear, direct, and simple messages focused on this topic is the most effective way to influence behaviour.**
- **Use language to tell stories about fairness, rights, and empowerment.**
- **Taking responsibility, acknowledging your limitations, and recognising customers as agents of change is the first step towards fostering a positive view of plastics reuse and reducing waste.**