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Product Stewardship Evolves as Industry Imperative



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Recycling is becoming part of our daily routine. We are collecting paper, aluminum, glass, rubber, and batteries for recycling. These recycling efforts, voluntary or imposed, might be interpreted as product stewardship or being good stewards of our environment by keeping materials out of the landfill. However, the product stewardship concept goes beyond the simple view most of us are familiar with. It encompasses producer responsibility at every stage of a product's life--from the initial design to end-of-life disposal.

Product stewardship can be defined as reducing the impact of products on the environment during their useful lives. In short, it advocates that "producers" of products improve the product design, minimize the environmental impact of product manufacturing, and finance their products' end of life as a natural part of a product's lifecycle. Producer actions can be motivated by many factors: legislative mandates, a desire to be good environmental citizens, the market value of the item collected, or brand image considerations.

Manufacturers, retailers, suppliers, governments, non-governmental entities (NGOs), researchers and consumers share a concern about sustainability and the waste caused by product use. All feel the pressure to reduce the environmental and social impacts of global consumption through product stewardship. As a result, voluntary stewardship programs by individual companies and industry sectors are growing in areas such as electronics and the batteries found in many electronics and power tools in the U.S. The ultimate goal of these, or any, product stewardship program is to reduce the environmental impact of product waste until there is zero waste.



The role of mandates

Recently, federal, state, provincial, and local governments have prescribed end-of-life disposal mandates as part of their commitment to product stewardship. In many states, product stewardship regulations not only require those deemed responsible for products to take them back for recycling, but to also develop educational initiatives to encourage consumers to bring those products back, whether to a retail or municipal drop-off location. These same regulations often have performance targets – and sometimes penalties for non-performance – placed onto obligated "producers" manufacturers and their product stewardship organizations that they've designated to fulfill these mandates.

What does product stewardship really mean?

Motivations aside, the idea of product stewardship has been around for a long time. The concept has evolved to mean different things to different people. Three groups, the Product Stewardship Institute, California Product Stewardship Council and Upstream, have published [a joint definition](#) of product stewardship:

The act of minimizing health, safety, environmental and social impacts, and maximizing economic benefits of a product and its packaging throughout all lifecycle stages." It can be either voluntary or required by law and states

that although "the producer of the product has the greatest ability to minimize adverse impacts, other stakeholders such as suppliers, retailers and consumers, also play a role.

Product stewardship acknowledges the leading role these three groups-- government, retailers, and consumers-- play in guiding the process. A delicate balance must be maintained among these stakeholders which have different priorities, opposing constraints and diverse definitions of success:

- **Consumers.** Makes purchasing decisions based on available information about product impacts and benefits. Responsible for reducing waste, reusing products and using take-back and other collection programs.
- **Retailers.** Sells brands made by producers that support an industry program. Responsible for providing information to consumers on take-back programs. Sells only those products that participate in stewardship.
- **Government.** Ensures a level playing field for the parties in the product value chain to maintain an open, competitive marketplace. Sets and enforces performance goals and standards for collection programs.

The roles of these groups and other constituencies in the product stewardship discussion are still evolving. But the shared goal is the same: find ways to recycle and re-use more materials, reduce materials that go into the landfill and protect the environment. Product stewardship programs help foster the transparency required to execute these responsibilities according to the industry standards and balance the needs of the various stakeholders in the process.

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