

Ridwell Recycles the Tricky Stuff

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We've all grown up trying to "close the loop" by recycling. We want to recycle everything we can. But [curbside recycling](#) programs are constantly shifting in response to commodities markets. A lot of things that are technically recyclable are not accepted by curbside programs. [Wishful recycling](#) — that's when people try to recycle things they shouldn't and end up contaminating the whole bin — has become part of a vicious circle of failed recycling programs.

When you can't put something in the recycle bin, and you know you shouldn't put it in the garbage, what do you do? For many of us, the answer is let it pile up in the basement or garage. When one Seattle family decided to clear out their semi-recyclable trash, they stumbled on a new business model that would make Marie Kondo proud.

Energized by Batteries

[It all started](#) when Seattle dad Ryan Metzger was trying to get rid of dead batteries. Even his six-year-old son knew that batteries contain chemicals that shouldn't just go in the garbage. But disposing of them properly was kind of a hassle. In Seattle, you either have to schedule a pickup (and pay a fee) or drive to a household hazardous waste facility where there is no charge.

Figuring that others probably had a bunch of old batteries to get rid of, too, Metzger posted on a [Buy Nothing](#) Facebook group, offering to save people a trip. And it snowballed from there.

Ridwell

Over the next year, Metzger found local recycling and safe disposal options for several other tricky materials. Then in October 2019, he and three partners launched [Ridwell](#), a semi-monthly supplementary recycling service that collects recyclables the city curbside program doesn't take.

Subscribers are given four cloth bags labeled for the service's primary materials: batteries, light bulbs, textiles, and [plastic film](#). Every pickup also includes a rotating fifth item. These specialty collections have included cookware for donation to refugees, eyeglasses, pet supplies, and Halloween candy. Subscribers can also pay an extra fee at any time to get rid of Styrofoam. And latex paint collection service is coming soon.



Subscribers collect materials for recycling in Ridwell cloth bags. Photo: Courtesy of Ridwell

What's Next

Right now, the company is only operating in a few Seattle neighborhoods. With Ridwell only in its second month of collection, it's impossible to say whether this business model is sustainable. Once subscribers have cleared out their backlog of recyclables, they may not need to maintain a regular subscription.

Ridwell does seem to be filling both a customer and an industry need. They help residents dispose of items conveniently and potentially reduce contamination in the larger municipal program. The rates (subscriptions cost \$10-\$14/month, depending on the length of commitment), if they can be sustained, are not intimidating.

But Ridwell is only a collection service, and they can only help connect customers with the recycling options already available. Seattle has a lot of those, but a lack of recycling infrastructure could keep Ridwell — or similar nascent ventures — from expanding into other regions.

Featured image courtesy of [Ridwell](#)

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