

You're the Boss

The Art of Running a Small Business



May 26, 2011, 7:00 am

Partnering With Companies That Sell Alcohol, Guns and Tobacco

By [TOM SZAKY](#)

Sustainable
Profits

A few years ago we were approached by [Nomacorc](#), leaders in the production of synthetic wine corks, to run a “[cork brigade](#).” We needed millions of corks at the time to create a cork board product that [Office Max](#) was ordering from us, and we concluded that wine, as controlled vices go, is rather innocuous. In the end, there wasn't much internal debate, so we partnered rather quickly with the alcohol industry.

At TerraCycle we run free collection programs for waste that allow individuals, community groups and offices to collect waste and send it to TerraCycle to be recycled or “[upcycled](#)” into new products. Schools happen to be a very big source of collections for TerraCycle. In fact, we are in more than 60 percent of all schools in America.

I preface the discussion this way because we have been approached by all three “Merchant of Death” industries that are highlighted in the movie “[Thank You for Smoking](#).” All three industries have waste streams that are not recyclable: alcohol has wine corks, guns have bullet casings, and tobacco has cigarette butts. For us, the question boils down to this: Should we censor the products we collect and recycle? Or should we collect any product that advances TerraCycle's mission of eliminating waste?

TerraCycle collects a broad range of waste streams: candy and cookie wrappers, cosmetic and personal-care packaging, empty glue sticks, worn-out flip flops, cups and plates, diapers, used pens and yogurt containers. We not only keep waste out of landfills or from being incinerated (which results in carbon emissions), we stop virgin material from being used in products and we replace it with material derived from previously non-recyclable waste. All of these positive outcomes have been documented by third-party lifecycle analyses.

In the case of wine corks, bullet casings and cigarette butts, the intention is consistent with TerraCycle's core mission: to find recycling and/or upcycling solutions for waste. With cigarettes (our most recent waste challenge), we've found that we can recycle used butts into two products: compost (from the paper and the tobacco) and park benches (from the filters). So long as people smoke, wouldn't the world be a better place if instead of throwing billions of butts into the trash or onto our streets, they sent them to TerraCycle for re-purposing? Shotgun shells, too, have many potential uses (think Christmas lights, for one fun example).

There may well be a legitimate debate as to whether certain industries should exist, but so long as they do exist, shouldn't we try to minimize their waste? I've had long arguments with friends in the natural products industry who claim that by collecting the waste of nonorganic products, TerraCycle is validating companies whose products are "less good." I argue that TerraCycle's job is to collect and re-purpose the vast amounts of waste generated by all companies and their consumers — not to judge whether one company or product is better than another. If we apply this logic to alcohol, guns and tobacco, I think the answer is clear: We should accept the waste of legal products and let the law and market work out which products thrive and which fail.

I view TerraCycle's role as doing for non-recyclable products — with the help of the manufacturers — what recycling does for our soda bottles and newspapers. Ultimately, I think it's commendable for these companies to take a proactive, nonlegislated stance on solving problems created by their products.

So is TerraCycle going to partner with alcohol, guns and tobacco? We've already done it with alcohol (the Cork Brigade is in its third year). As for guns and tobacco, we're working on them with the intention of introducing programs early next year. I hope that concerned teachers and parents will agree that solving our waste problem is critical and that we shouldn't discriminate against certain types of garbage.

Tom Szaky is the chief executive of [TerraCycle](#), which is based in Trenton, N.J.

- [E-mail This](#)
- [Print](#)
- Share

Twitter

Recommend

[Sustainable Profits](#), [alcohol](#), [guns](#), [Nomacorc](#), [partnerships](#), [tobacco](#)

Related Posts

From You're the Boss

- [A Business Owner Finds an Ideal Exit](#)
- [On Small-Business Taxes, Don't Believe the Hype — From Either Side](#)

-
- Previous Post [Wells Fargo Bankers Will Take Your Questions](#) **8 Readers' Comments**
 - Next Post [Taking the Bait: On Prix Fixe, Sustainable Seafood and Restaurant Economics](#)

[Post a Comment »](#)