

by Paul van der Werf

“Municipalities are looking for high quality product at a reasonable price that is also easy to access.”



Always Fresh!

Or, it's time to sing a different compost marketing song

*“Hear my song. People won't you listen now? Sing along.
You don't know what you're missing now.
Any little song that you know
Everything that's small has to grow.”*

In June, Alberta Environment released *Municipal Compost Use in Alberta — A Report on Survey Results*. The survey was conducted to better understand how Alberta municipal green spaces are managed and constructed, with an underlying goal of finding viable markets for all compost products produced.

They found that sports fields, playgrounds and boulevards are the three most common green spaces managed by municipalities, and that top dressing with compost was a relative rare occurrence. More than half of these municipalities planned to build new green spaces, such as these, in the next two years. Almost 40 per cent reported mixing in composts with topsoils when establishing green spaces.

Nonetheless, compost use appears to be impeded primarily by weak soil standards and developers completing construction based on municipal construction specifications.

This has been a challenge across Canada and the US (although it appears to be changing here). Specifications become entrenched. The prospect of change negatively impacts perceived risks and project costs, so they remain.

Municipalities and other levels of government have the power to make change. They're the ones encouraging the diversion of organic wastes, on the one hand, but who often have the other hand in their pocket when it comes time to — if not outright mandate product use — at least better facilitate its use.

According to the survey, most Alberta municipalities don't have any specific policies regarding compost use, yet they don't outright discourage its use. That is to say, if compost is available when required, it will probably be used. If it's not there, it will likely not be “sought out.”

Progress has been made at the provincial level entrenching compost in certain projects. For instance, Alberta Transportation includes the use of compost blankets in *The Field Guide for Erosion and Sediment Control (2010)*. The Product List outlines consideration for use of compost for filter berms and blankets. The City of Edmonton, a large producer of compost, has developed a design guide for low-impact development, which includes guidance on using compost.

The vast majority of Alberta municipalities reported no problems or barriers with compost use; however, those that did identified product quality and cost as key issues. Notably, two thirds of survey respondents were unaware of the Compost Council of Canada's Compost Quality Alliance (CQA) program.

To parse the study, municipalities are looking for high quality product at a reasonable price that is also easy to access. (This also seems to work well for cars, coffee and Caribbean vacations.)

Marketing

The marketers of compost have come a long way in the last two decades. They're now at a healthy plateau of their own making, but are still asking some of the same questions, like “How do we get people to buy and use compost?”

As if stuck in the event horizon of a Star Trek Voyager quantum singularity, the messages one hears today are the same ones as 20 years ago: compost is a good source of organic matter, it contains nutrients, it improves water-holding capacity, and so on. To get to the next plateau, marketers need to move beyond these messages and get people thinking about compost as simply another consumer product.

Tim Horton's created seemingly eternal line ups at its stores through the simple “Always Fresh” master stroke of throwing out pots of coffee after 20 minutes. There it is in two words, the embodiment of a company's approach to its key product and one that clearly resonates with customers.

I know in London, Ontario each year on the first Saturday of May, the three words “Compost Value Day,” (a community event to promote compost use), induces Tim Horton-sized line ups to buy top notch compost produced by Try Recycling Inc. — at least for a few hours until supplies are exhausted.

How can you market compost in two words? Healthy Soils? Growing Plants? Growing Soil? Always Grows? The best slogan could be devised by the industry as a whole, or maybe a smart company will figure it out.

Like Always Fresh, this marketing campaign needs to be built around the high quality products and composts attributes that are now thoroughly proven.

*California sunlight, sweet Calcutta rain
Honolulu Star-bright, the song remains the same.*



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