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I'm Too Sexy for My Scraps

Bauhaus-style design comes to waste management

Can design transform people's ideas about diverting food waste in the kitchen from something yucky and to be hidden into something cool and worthy of display?

California's Ucan Products (www.ucan-products.com) seems to think so; with wording reminiscent of the "uncola" soft drink campaigns of yesteryear, the company recently started to distribute what it calls the "Untrash Can."

Ucan asserts that form can improve function, and claims that something pleasing to the eye will generate greater participation in source-separation programs for household organics.

Applying good industrial design to improve function is nothing new, but it may well be for the aesthetically-challenged waste sector. All we have to do is look at most garbage cans, blue boxes and green bins to understand that they're meat-and-potatoes utilitarian, and not at all graceful.

So, do the hunks of functional plastic into which we place our garbage really need to be aesthetically pleasing? Will it make a difference?

It works for IKEA. The Swedish retailer uses industrial design to make strangely-named and inexpensive mass-produced products appealing to consumers. The late Steve Jobs was heavily influenced by the Bauhaus movement that (in a nutshell) doesn't distinguish between fine art and applied design. It's apparent to all that Apple products do cool things and look great at the same time. Jobs revolutionized computing — it's clear that if it was up to programmers alone, computers would still be ugly boxes with screens as big as microwave ovens.

Design project

Ucan recruited leading industrial designers Branko Lukic and Steve Takayama, formerly

of IDEO, to re-imagine the kind of kitchen compost bins supplied by cities and waste agencies, and to do so with the intent of increasing program participation.

The Untrash Can (*see photos*) is a sleek white kitchen container with a lime green handle. It's made from a minimum of 50 percent recycled plastic, with a handle that folds away,



Photos show the sleek Ucan organics container and its hide-away green handle.

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interior bag holder and unique lid design that allows consumers to empty the contents with one hand.

Ucan Co-Founder and CEO Anne Morrissey likens most of today's kitchen organics containers as "buckets to collect food" and contends

they're a disincentive to diversion.

"The vast majority of people put their kitchen container under the sink and then forget about it," she says.

Things may not be too bad in some Canadian jurisdictions, "ugly" containers notwithstand-

ing. Waste Diversion Ontario estimates that about 2.5 million of the provinces households have access to a green bin program and that on average each household diverts about 160 kg/year or about 3 kg per week. The capture rate is probably about 60 per cent, representing at least a couple of kitchen-container loads to the green bin each week, which is pretty good.


Things may be a bit different stateside.

"More than 180 US cities and towns have adopted curbside composting in the past three years," says Morrissey. "But consumers still throw food in the trash. Ucan gives cities new tools for compliance; these are kitchen cans with high design values that spur adoption through performance, ease of use and aesthetics."

"We designed the can to remove the 'ick' factor of food waste recycling," says Morrissey. "Compliance correlates with ease of use, proximity to the sink and performance. The Untrash Can reduces smells, keeps hands clean and, unlike municipal eyesores, is something that consumers are proud to have in their kitchens."

Morrissey says the container was designed to look like it belongs in the kitchen, and can go on top of or under the sink.

My wife Nadia is my sounding board on these matters. She dutifully recycles but does struggle with the organic side of the equation (my job). She assures me that no matter what the container looks like, it's not under the sink, not on top of the counter! I admit that this is but a survey sample of one person.

Ucan is shipping its first Canadian load of Untrash cans to Lloydminster, Alberta for that community's upcoming pilot program. With no track record here it's unclear whether the design will make a difference to the three million or so Canadian households that use kitchen organics containers. While the design of this new kitchen bin is probably not an "Apple" moment, there were many that argued Job's obsession with form did not matter. But for them it did matter. It still matters. 

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