

Circular Economy Spotlight: Smarter Sorting Helps the Goods of Today Become the Resources of Tomorrow

by Scott Mackey | Jul 1, 2019



This article is the first of a “Circularity Spotlight” series examining how Smarter Sorting fits into the burgeoning circular economy movement, both now and in the future. During this first post, we’ll briefly review the “waste equals food” circularity principle.

William McDonough, known to many as a “father of the circular economy” and co-creator of “[Cradle to Cradle](#)” design, was the first to coin this iconic phrase: “waste equals food.” The phrase is a simple yet powerful cornerstone of the modern circular economy movement.

To understand what it means, we need a quick snapshot of our current economic system, which is based on a linear “take-make-waste” model. Simply put: we extract materials (take),

manufacture these materials into goods (make), and finally discard these goods (waste).

To understand the circular economy, consider this imagery: the linear economic model—a straight line—is “bent” into a circle and connected at its ends so that “take” and “waste” are intertwined, and dependent on each other. The “take” in a circular model derives from the “waste” (instead of virgin resources). Waste becomes food for the next cycle, which repeats perpetually. The goods of today become the resources of tomorrow. Hence, waste equals food.

Are you dizzy yet?

Smarter Sorting is tackling this fundamental circularity concept in a very tangible way when it helps retailers track and divert unsaleable items—previously considered “waste”—into pathways of reuse and recycling.

The [Smarter Sorting platform](#) allows retailers to monitor unsaleable items inventories in transparent, intuitive ways. Machine learning technology provides valuable data that helps retailers make better decisions regarding the most sustainable pathways forward for these materials—instead of just shipping them off to an incinerator or landfill. Smarter data means smarter decisions.

What does this look like in practice? If you can donate inventory previously classified as “waste” to a local nonprofit (for a tax write-off, by the way!), salvage or reuse the material (perhaps for an in-store project), the Smarter Sorting platform prompts your

back-of-store employees to do so. We take the guesswork out of answering the question, “What’s next?”

Items previously considered “waste” become valuable assets. Waste equals food.

Okay, I think you get it.

Do you want to learn more about what the circular economy is, and why this model of doing business is revolutionary? Then visit [The Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#) for more information.

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Retailers and Regulated Waste: Your 'Google Maps' Moment Has Arrived

by Josh Groves | May 22, 2019



Even after a career in high-tech, I've learned there are specific low-tech experiences I still enjoy. Flipping through a book's pages, hearing the "crinkle" of a newspaper, putting a pen on paper—these experiences all occupy parts of my non-digital existence on occasion.

However, my low-tech nostalgia is noticeably absent when it comes to road trip technology. I can even point to a specific date — February 8, 2005—as the beginning of the end of my interaction with physical maps. That was when Google Maps launched. Soon after, the road maps I stored in my car's door compartments were all but forgotten. Why?

I didn't want to be the road trip “decision engine”—i.e., the navigator—any more.

I wanted to put my energies elsewhere. Whether that meant concentrating on my duties behind the wheel or enjoying the scenery, I happily gave navigation responsibilities to my new partner. Google Maps made this choice easy and navigation mostly decision free: I followed directions, I drove, I arrived at the destination. The service also provided real-time information (current traffic issues, road closures, etc.) not available with traditional paper maps. In other words, road trips 2.0.

Despite the occasional glitch and connectivity problems, I can't imagine my life without the technology.

I'm guessing you can't, either.

Retailers attempting to navigate the roads of regulated waste and unsalable item management may arrive at the same conclusions. Like modern-day trip-takers, retailers may wish to invest their time in something other than making difficult

decisions on how to properly process regulated waste and unsalable items. Without clear direction, employees making these decisions in the back of store run the risk of getting lost on a route to compliance risks, high expenses, time inefficiencies, and non-data-driven decision-making.

Retailers—like drivers—may not wish to be the decision engine anymore, either.

If you are a retailer and this description applies to you, good news: your Google Maps moment has arrived.

Answering 'what's next?'

Unfortunately, many retailers are on a less-than-optimized road trip when it comes to managing regulated waste and unsalable items. Sadly, many still live in a “Version 1.0” universe—which can be problematic for a back-of-store clerk who must answer this question concerning this merchandise: “What’s next?”

As in, should it be donated and tracked as a tax write-off? Is it diverted to a waste bucket? Is it recycled? Is it returned to the vendor? Or something else?

This answer can be daunting in a retail environment beholden to evolving state and federal regulations, environmental considerations and strict corporate oversight. Furthermore,

considering that one-in-10 products carried by retailers are unsalable for various reasons (damage, expiration, customer return, etc.), the issue is not isolated.

Retail employees who answer these questions—who often have limited or no experience with regulated waste issues, are employed part-time or work in a high-turnover environment—must often wade through mountains of manuals and paperwork to verify best courses of action. Even then the solution may not be clear, and more information is needed. Without a decision engine, this process can become very cumbersome, very time-consuming and very confusing—very quickly.

Smarter Sorting is that decision engine for retailers.

Through simple data collection (scanning, weighing and photographing the product), Smarter Sorting calculates the optimal pathway for a product, integrating geographical regulations and company guidelines into potential management options. It then puts that collected data to work to optimize processes moving forward so retail employees don't have to.

No more wrong turns or dead ends. Just clear, time-saving direction for back-of-store employees and streamlined operations that create cost savings, maximize tax benefits and minimize waste.

Yes, low-tech nostalgia may have a place in this world. I only hope it's not in the back of your store.

[Explore Smarter Sorting's platform](#)

Four Ways to Level-Up Retail Operations

by Charlie Vallely | Jun 12, 2019



In an environment where scan guns and old-school technology are often the norms, a critical question deserves consideration in the retail world: how much value is lost if innovations are not integrated into the management of damaged, returned, or unsold items?

With new technologies rapidly becoming mainstream, retail has an opportunity to re-imagine store management structures while finding massive value in the process. Transformative opportunities exist, and retailers must consider them to stay competitive.

Below are four solutions that will help you determine if you've "leveled up" your retail operations across its entirety, or if you

have some work to do.

Solution 1: Put Big Data to Work

While “big data” is a buzzword, it has real-world applications. How can big data help your business? Let’s start with the obvious: sound decision-making depends on access to the right information. Big data collection can provide this insight.

Your organization may think it knows everything it should about handling damaged, returned or unsold items in the most cost-effective and sustainable ways possible. However, without a consolidation of this data, there is likely no mechanism to share this information with the people who need it most: hourly employees making frontline decisions.

Through big data, your employees can access tools to make cost- and waste-reducing decisions at every step. Data sets that document every piece of useful information—from resale value to waste categorization to sustainability options—can be built and reside in one location. You’ll also have the capacity to record and measure hundreds of characteristics about every product you sell. Armed with this documentation, you can build software that puts the information to work (while making you look pretty darn smart at the same time). Win, win.

Solution 2: Meet Employees on Their Turf (Screens)

Retail employees often use phones loaded with apps—software that is both aesthetically pleasing and intuitively designed.

Technology companies put tremendous energy into creating these “perfect” apps.

What if retailers invested similar energy into the creation of in-store item management systems that are easy to use and widely accessible? One possible answer: businesses and their employees may become a lot more efficient.

If you struggle to train your employees and ensure efficient, accountable operations, there’s a decent chance you need to consider a more robust technology solution.

Solution 3: Making Better Decisions

Good news: your in-store technology generates content-rich data about your inventory. Nice work. So, you’re all done? Not entirely, because measuring inventory data is just part of the equation.

Another big piece of the picture? Your staff, of course. If employee decision-making processes are not measured, they cannot be optimized. Moreover, if these processes are not optimized, your business may be flying blind—and potentially losing money.

How do you know you’re getting the data you need to optimize decision making? Start by answering the following questions:

- Do I know how long it takes for employees to manage an item?

- Do I know what decisions were made about an item?
- Do I understand why particular choices were made?
- Do I know the cost of the decision?
- Do I know there wasn't a better way?

If you answered “no” to any (or all) of these queries, don't fret. However, do realize it's time to start asking hard questions about how to improve your system—and your profits.

Solution 4: Start a ‘Snowball Effect’

Retailers that successfully optimize in-store operations can identify and address small inefficiencies, and these management corrections can unlock substantial savings in both time and money.

Even seemingly minor changes can create powerful momentum. For example, if a major retailer is aware that a particular item is regularly damaged or returned and then optimizes interactions with the item in one store, these changes may be adopted in thousands of other locations with hundreds of thousands of SKUs. Things can add up quickly—like a snowball.

So, How Did You Do?

If you got through this article and just yawned, then bravo! You must be maximizing the potential benefits of new data and software solutions. You also must have gotten a great night's sleep. However, if reading this leaves you with more questions,

it's time to put on your big data hats and get to work. Remember: making small changes upfront can lead to bigger bottom lines later.

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