ReMA
Recycled Materials Association

A common language for the recycled materials industry

Breaking through in a new era of communication

In collaboration with maslansky+partners

Our common goals as an industry require a common language.

Recycling isn't easy. This is a complex industry, bringing together distinct companies, commodities, and technologies.

A small rubber recycler in North Carolina looks different than a large metal operation outside the California suburbs. Each recycler operates in its own environment, faces its own challenges, and knows its own business inside and out.

At the same time, we share common goals across the entire industry:

✔ ### We want more recognition.
Recycling is essential, but it can be a thankless job. We want more people to value the work we do to power local economies, support a sustainable world, and build a better future.

✔ ### We want to correct misperceptions.
Today, skeptics at the local, state, and federal levels paint a picture of a recycling industry that's "broken" and needs to be "fixed." These criticisms make it harder for recyclers to operate in their communities and create a difficult regulatory landscape. We need to reframe the narrative.

✔ ### We want to write our own story.
Historically, we have been content to work in the background. Our facilities were out of sight. We stayed quiet and worked hard. Sadly, this approach isn't enough anymore. In a world of constant communication and controversy, we need to take control of our story, or someone else will tell it for us.

We cannot achieve these goals by communicating as we have in the past. We need a fresh approach that's based on an understanding of our audiences and designed to help them appreciate what we do every day.

If we each tell our story in a different way, we risk undermining each other. But if we all consistently tell the same story and pull in the same direction as an industry, we amplify our message.

That's where this playbook comes in. It's based on extensive communication research conducted by maslansky + partners, a leading language strategy and market research firm. In collaboration with our team at ReMA, they analyzed coverage of the industry in traditional and social media, and conducted focus groups and a national survey with informed consumers and policy opinion leaders.

This process included…

1 ### The Media Landscape
Traditional and social media analysis of coverage of the recycling industry.

2 ### Qualitative Research
Focus groups with informed consumers and policy opinion leaders to test our current messages vs. different approaches, as well as interviews with Brand Council members.

3 ### Quantitative
A nationwide survey to further pressure test and refine the language we use.

4 ### A Common Language For Our Industry
A blueprint of the most effective language to use—and not use. Research findings and recommendations are summarized in this playbook.

This playbook is part of a larger effort to **strengthen the industry's voice** by creating a **standardized set of effective messaging guidelines** for industry communicators. If we all use this shared language, we can build reputation, raise awareness, and drive engagement with industry issues to benefit us all.

Speaking the language of our audience

Of course, it's not enough to speak the same language. We need it to be the *right* language.

How people outside the industry see us matters to our future success. We need to be able to effectively reach the public, policymakers, advocacy organizations, and business partners alike.

These audiences have different goals and experiences than those of us who work with recycling every day.

They don't know what we know about the industry or its challenges—and they don't want to know.

They don't understand the word "extrusion" or how a shredder works, and they don't always understand how important or how complex our work is.

What they do know tends to come from personal experience with blue bins, movies, and the media. So, if we want to reach them, we need to speak *their* language.

Our research showed that our message is most effective when it's:

✔ **Plainspoken.**
Keep it simple. Get rid of industry terms and jargon and speak in relatable language.

✔ **Positive.**
Focus on positive imagery and make clear what we stand FOR, rather than talking about the things we don't like or oppose. Avoid negative imagery and complaining.

✔ **Personal.**
Don't just focus on recycling as a system. Put our message in the context of our audience's lives. Show how our industry benefits people in tangible ways.

Most importantly, our research showed we need a shift in focus.

If we want our language to be relevant and resonant for the people we're trying to reach, we need to:

✗ Focus less on	✔ Focus more on
Industry. The system. The process. The machines. The size of the industry, the revenue, and the jobs.	**Outcomes.** The benefits and impact we have on people's everyday lives.
Inputs. The scrap. The discarded items and material that goes into our facilities.	**Outputs.** The high-quality material we make. The resources that come out of our facilities.
Waste stream. Recycling as an alternative destination, replacing landfills.	**Supply chain.** Recycling as an alternative source, replacing natural resources.

What you'll find in this playbook

The rest of this playbook walks through how you can apply these principles on how to talk and write about the industry in your day-to-day life and work.

It includes…

1 A set of simple, repeatable messages to help you talk consistently and clearly about the industry with external audiences.

2 Watchouts: words and messages to avoid that were ineffective in testing.

3 Principles for how to apply this language most effectively, with insights to explain why.

4 Example use cases and scenarios where you can apply the language.

5 The 11 phrases to remember when telling the industry's story. (summarized on page 19)

6 The 11 phrases to avoid when telling the industry's story. (summarized on page 20)

Overall, we've structured this playbook to help you answer four main questions about the recycling industry whenever you're communicating with external audiences.

Who are we?

What do we do?

Why does it matter?

Where are we headed?

Who we are

In a sentence: We are the recycled materials industry.

**We can use this language any time we refer to the industry as a whole.
For example, you could say:**

✔   "I work in the recycled materials industry."

✔   "The recycled materials industry is an essential part of the global economy."

✔   "Representatives on behalf of the recycled materials industry are calling for revised regulations."

✔   "The recycled materials industry has evolved over the last fifty years with the invention of new, cutting-edge technologies and streamlined processes."

In content and collateral, that could mean:

✗ **Before**	✔ **After**
10 Facts About The Scrap Recycling Industry	**10 Facts About The Recycled Materials Industry**
Scrap Is Not Waste	**Recycled Material Is An Essential Ingredient In Our Economy**
Latest News Releases ReMA, the Voice of the Recycling Industry™, provides expert insight on key issues relevant to **scrap recyclers** and the communities they serve…	**Latest News Releases** ReMA, the Voice of the Recycled Materials Industry™, provides expert insight on key issues relevant to **recycled material suppliers** and the communities they serve…

A closer look at why it works

You only get one chance to make a first impression.

Human brains are lazy and like shortcuts. When someone encounters a new idea, they try to fit it into a box to make it easier to understand.

Today, when we introduce ourselves as the "scrap" industry, people throw us in a box alongside "junkyards," "leftovers," and "trash." They make negative assumptions about us based on the other things in that box.

When we instead start with "recycled materials," we're putting ourselves in a different, better box without so much baggage. Effectively, we're re-positioning ourselves to be a part of the manufacturing supply chain—which gives people a totally different frame of reference for the work we do.

Being the scrap industry leads to another problem: it focuses on inputs. That opens the door for argument about what doesn't get recycled. We call attention to the part of the system that people don't think is working.

If we instead focus on recycled materials, we focus on the part of the system that *is* working. We remind people we're the ones responsible for all the stuff getting recycled and turned into new products.

We're reordering the story to *start* with recycling's outcomes and impact:

✗ **Less about**	✔ **More about**
We process scrap Just because we start our work with scrap, process it, and then end with recycled material, doesn't mean we have to tell our story in that order.	**We produce recycled material** If we start with the output, we start with the benefit—and then we can go on to tell the story of how we deliver that benefit.

Less about: 1 Inputs → 2 Process → 3 Outputs

More about: 1 Outputs → 2 Process → 3 Inputs

What we do

In a sentence: We provide a **renewable source** of **high-quality materials** for the **everyday items** and **essential infrastructure** people depend on.

We can use this language any time we need to describe the core function of the industry, what we do on a day-to-day basis, or how our work affects people's day-to-day lives.

This means making some shifts in the way we communicate. For example:.

✘ In the past when you would have said...	✔ Today, you would instead say...
We divert material from landfills	We supply material for manufacturing
Commodity-grade	High-quality
Feedstock	Raw material
We're supporting a circular economy	We're providing a renewable source of materials
We take in discarded items	We help make items you use and depend on

In content and collateral, that could mean:

✘ Before	✔ After		
130 million metric tons of valuable commodities processed by recycling annually.	Recycling is essential to the manufacturing of new products.	More than 75% of U.S. paper mills depend on recovered fiber to make packaging for boxed goods.	This combine was made, in part, from a recycled washing machine.

A closer look at the language

The term *"circular economy"* is positive, but research showed people don't always think it's possible. On the other hand, people are already familiar with the power of renewable resources.

✔ **renewable**

In research, participants told us *"diverting from landfills"* sounds like a temporary, partial solution. It reminds people of **how much waste doesn't get diverted.**

Instead of comparing ourselves to landfills as a **destination** for waste, flip it and frame the industry as a source of renewable materials.

It opens the door to the positive role we play in helping manufacturers make new, useful things.

A helpful distinction for using *"source"* vs. *"resource"*: We are a *"source"* of renewable materials. We *"provide"* renewable resources.

✔ **source**

Today we often rely on industry terms like *"commodity-grade"* or *"feedstock."*

The truth is that almost no one knows what these words mean. *"Commodity-grade"* to industry outsiders sounds like it means low-quality. And more than one person we spoke to assumed *"feedstock"* had to do with farm animals.

Using simpler language, like high-quality, helps our message be heard as we intend.

✔ **high-quality materials**

A closer look at the language

How do we show people our industry matters? It's tempting to turn to the numbers and use metrics like...

✗ **$117 billion in economic impact**	✗ **130 million tons of scrap**	✗ **500,000 jobs**

But it's more effective when you talk about...

✔ everyday items and essential infrastructure

Numbers don't mean much to industry outsiders. Most people don't have the context to fully understand whether it's a little or a lot. More importantly, unless it's their jobs or their money, they can't make the connection to how it benefits them.

To connect, we need to make our impact personal. Bring it down from lofty numbers and into the world around them. Saying that we contribute to everyday items and essential infrastructure is a strong focus of our story.

When we start to list the commonplace yet critical things that get made with recycled materials, people start to see how they benefit from what we do. On the next page, you'll see examples of how we can do this with both words and images.

In the past, the industry has relied on imagery of big machines and piles of scrap. To tell a more positive, powerful story, we should use imagery of the things made with the materials we produce.

For example:

✔ **Bridges made from recycled steel**	✔ **Roads made with recycled rubber**
✔ **Hospital ventilators made with recycled copper wire**	✔ **Wiring and plumbing in our houses made with recycled metals**

Finding the right examples

There are three rules of thumb for choosing real-life examples of products that are made with recycled materials. If you're trying to decide what image or example to use, check to make sure it's:

✔ **Common.**
Something people see or use often, like the electrical wires in their house.

✔ **Crucial.**
Something people depend on, like the titanium in a grandparent's hip replacement.

✔ **Surprising.**
Something people might not suspect uses recycled materials. Most people know paper towels use recycled paper, but they might not know a sports car uses recycled materials, too.

Why it matters: Reason #1

In a sentence: We make the supply chain **more sustainable.**

✔ **We protect natural resources**	✔ **We reduce carbon emissions**	✔ **We reduce waste**

We can use this language any time we need to explain why the recycled materials industry matters to the environment. For example, you could say:

✔ "Supporting the recycled materials industry means you're supporting a more sustainable supply chain."

✔ "We have a positive environmental impact because we protect natural resources and reduce carbon emissions."

✔ "The recycled materials industry is making the supply chain more sustainable by reducing waste and supplying high-quality material to manufacturers to make new products."

In content and collateral, that could mean:

✘ Before	✔ After
The recycling industry benefits the environment by reducing the amount of material sent to landfills, thereby preserving the land for better uses.	The recycled materials industry benefits the environment by reducing the need to cut down trees for paper, mine for ore, extract fossil fuels for plastic, and deplete natural resources. **OR** The recycled materials industry benefits the environment by providing a sustainable alternative to natural resources.

A closer look at the language

Sustainability is a bigger focus than ever. Consumers are calling for it, advocacy groups and policymakers are fighting over it, and companies are constantly looking for ways to show progress.

We have a fantastic story to tell when it comes to sustainability. Our benefits are clear in each part of the manufacturing process and product lifecycle. From the start, we protect natural resources by reducing the need to mine, drill, or cut new raw material. We reduce emissions with cleaner processes compared to traditional manufacturing. And finally, we reduce waste by ensuring products are reused.

The problem is that today, we only talk about the *last* part of the story: reducing waste. Even when we do talk about it, we talk about it in terms of "diverting from landfills," which is language that consumers felt sounded weak. We don't talk nearly as much about the first two parts of the story, even though in research, we found that protecting natural resources and reducing carbon emissions were far more important to most people.

Focus more on **Reducing the need to cut, mine, drill**	*Focus more on* **Reducing emissions**	*Then end the story with* **Reducing waste**
"When manufacturers source raw materials for a product, we provide a more sustainable alternative to cutting trees, mining, drilling, or harvesting natural resources."	"Compared to the processing and transportation needed for most other methods, recycling produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions."	"At the end of a product's life, recycling keeps more products from going to waste."

People already know the last part—and they love to argue over how much recycling is actually reducing waste, if at all. They also, frankly, just don't like talking about garbage.

If we talk more about our impact as a sustainable alternative to natural resources, we're telling a story that has positive imagery of the trees, water, and land we're protecting rather than a story that has negative imagery of landfills and waste.

The work we do to keep products out of the waste stream is important, but that comes at the end of the product's life cycle. It should come at the end of our story, too.

Pop Quiz: Do you think people would rather hear about protecting "natural resources" or "virgin materials"?

Research showed "virgin materials" is industry jargon. The people we want to reach care about **"natural resources."**

Why it matters: Reason #2

In a sentence: We make the supply chain **more secure.**

✔ **More resilient** | ✔ **More dependable** | ✔ **More self-sufficient**

We can use this language any time we need to explain why the recycled materials industry matters to the economy. For example, you could say:

✔ "The recycled materials industry is making the supply chain more secure by providing a resilient source of raw material."

✔ "We keep the global supply chain moving. Together, we can be less dependent on any one market or source, which makes the supply chain more dependable as a whole."

✔ "We have a positive economic impact because recycling makes manufacturing more self-sufficient."

In content and collateral, that could mean:

✘ Before	✔ After

Before: Recycling is essential to a healthy trade balance.

After: With recycling, we can get raw materials locally and securely.

OR

We produce high-quality materials that keep our supply chains running.

A closer look at the language

The last few years have become the supply chain security era. Suddenly, everyday consumers pay attention to the supply chain and its effect on when and how they'll receive the products they want.

People talk about shipping delays or inventory shortages—ways that the abstract economy can impact their everyday life.

We should speak their language and address their concerns. When we talk about how we're helping the supply chain, people realize our significant impact.

So, that means focusing less on the numbers, and more on how we strengthen the supply chain. There may be some conversations—such as advocacy—where dollar amounts and jobs may be helpful to mention. But the big point is to *lead* with and emphasize the supply chain, and follow up with the numbers if needed.

✘ Less about	✔ More about
$117 billion in economic impact	
130 million tons of scrap	**Creating a more resilient, dependable, and self-sufficient supply chain**
500,000 jobs	

This is our opportunity to show that we can help address supply chain issues. People feel uncertain and unstable, so we can point to how we create a more secure supply chain. Given the complex system and challenges in foreign markets, it's meaningful that we help the supply chain be more *resilient*, *dependable*, and *self-sufficient*.

"I'm seeing this as a benefit to me, to whatever product I'm purchasing."

- Informed Consumer

"I think the supply chain resonates so much more now, and it's not going to stop being an issue. I would lean on that."

- Policy Opinion Leader

Where we're headed

In a few sentences:

We're continuously innovating to recycle **more material, more efficiently.**

We know we're just **one part of the solution**, so we're **working with individuals and communities** to help them sort and recycle more.

Because consumer brands and big companies have a role to play, we **partner** with them to **help them recycle more, use more recycled materials in their products,** and **design their products to be recycled more easily.**

The industry faces criticisms about whether it works the way it should. To address these misperceptions, it's important to show that we acknowledge we can do better. We can do that by highlighting the ways we continue to innovate and partner with others to have a large-scale impact.

Oftentimes, this is left out of our story today, but being forward-looking and showing continuous improvement has a ton of upsides, especially when talking with key audiences like the media or advocacy organizations.

In content and collateral, that could mean:

Focus more on...

✔ ReMA's goal in creating the Brands Leadership Council is to provide a forum for leading brands and responsible recyclers to come together to thoughtfully solve problems and develop solutions for sustainability.

✔ Using artificial intelligence and optical scanners to recycle items that were once considered "hard to recycle."

A closer look at the language

"We're continuously innovating to recycle more material, more efficiently."

This language acknowledges people's fears and frustrations that the industry isn't doing enough without sounding defensive.

It shows that we've come a long way, but that there's still more to do, so we're always moving forward.

When there's enough time and space, highlight technologies like:

✔ Electric cranes, robotics, and artificial intelligence*

✔ Sensors to detect and separate recyclables based on shape, density, material, and color

"We're part of the solution."	With a big challenge ahead, we earn credit with our audiences if we're humble enough to acknowledge that we can't do it alone.
"We're working with individuals and communities."	People want to be part of the solution. They want to have ownership and be involved in making the world a better place. This brings them into the fold and puts us on the same team.
"We're partnering with companies to help them recycle more, use more recycled materials in their products, and design their products to be recycled more easily."	Many people don't think it's fair for the responsibility of recycling to fall on regular people while big companies are creating the majority of waste. We can use this as an opportunity to recognize the public's concerns, and show we are allies in helping make sure big companies do their part, too.

*Just be careful with the word "automation," which can make people worry about disappearing jobs.

The 11 phrases
to remember and use

✔	**Recycled materials**	What we make and the industry we're in.
✔	**Renewable source**	The role we play in manufacturing.
✔	**High-quality**	How to describe the value / grade of the materials we make for manufacturers.
✔	**Everyday items**	The end-product of our work that shows up in people's everyday lives.
✔	**Essential infrastructure**	
✔	**Supply chain**	The system we're a part of (rather than the waste stream). A way to help people realize our impact in manufacturing and the economy today.
✔	**Sustainable**	The first reason to use recycled materials: we protect natural resources and reduce emissions.
✔	**Secure**	The second reason to use recycled materials: we're a reliable, long-term source of raw material people can depend on.
✔	**Innovation**	How to acknowledge we can always do more: we're working to recycle more material, more efficiently.
✔	**Partner**	Adds credibility and shows people we're on the same team. We're giving them a role and asking large consumer brands to do their part, too.
✔	**Retail customer**	A simpler, more modern word to describe the companies we serve and the people who buy the recycled material we make.

The 11 phrases
to avoid

✘	**Scrap**	Carries negative associations with junkyards, leftovers, and trash. Focuses only on the inputs of recycling. Limits us to one commodity given its strong association with metal.
✘	**Shred / Process**	Focuses on the machines and the system, not the benefits to everyday people. Sounds industrial and destructive.
✘	**Divert from landfills**	Sounds like a temporary, partial solution. Puts us in the waste stream instead of the supply chain.
✘	**Commodity-grade**	Jargon that's unclear to our audiences. Many people outside the industry interpret this as average-to-low quality.
✘	**Feedstock**	Jargon that's unclear to our audiences. People outside the industry thought it had to do with farm animals.
✘	**Virgin materials**	People don't immediately understand that we mean like-new or new material.
✘	**$117 billion in economic impact**	Abstract ways of talking about our impact that lack enough context for our audience to realize just how significant of an impact we make.
✘	**130 million tons**	With the right context, especially when localized to specific states or communities, these numbers can still be powerful with lawmakers. They just don't resonate with a wider audience.
✘	**500,000 jobs**	
✘	**Circular economy**	Feels like a buzzword and can be too highbrow for the general public.
✘	**Peddler**	An old-fashioned word that undersells the value of our customers and is easy to misinterpret.

Frequently asked questions

What is this playbook and who is it for?

This is a resource for communicators working across the recycled materials industry. It's a guide for anyone talking to external audiences—including policymakers, advocacy organizations, business partners, or the general public—to ensure we're all speaking a common language as an industry. It's also an important step in a larger process of refreshing the industry's image and strengthening its reputation.

How do I use this playbook?

This isn't meant to be a script, but rather a set of guidelines. The example phrases and content throughout are tested best practices that are starting points for you to use and build on in ways that feel natural to you. The more you can follow these guidelines, the more you'll help people see our industry more positively.

Why do I need this playbook?

We are in a new era of communication, where everyone has a platform and people are barraged with messages from all sides. If we're going to be heard, we need to be speaking with one voice. If we want that voice to resonate, we need to be speaking the language of our audience in a way that meets them where they are, accounts for their perceptions of the industry today, and ultimately persuades them.

Where did this playbook come from?

ReMA hired maslansky + partners, a leading language strategy and market research firm, to analyze how we communicate today and how we can improve. This playbook is a culmination of their extensive research that included a traditional and social media analysis, focus groups, and a nationwide survey with informed consumers and policy opinion leaders.

Why did ISRI change its name?

In 2024, following this language research, the Institute for Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI) rebranded to be the Recycled Materials Association — or ReMA, for short. Our new name reflects the full breadth of our impact and value on the world. It focuses on what we make, create, and provide, from essential infrastructure to everyday items, and helps us connect with important audiences outside of the industry, like policymakers, advocacy organizations, business partners, or the general public.

ReMA

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Association