

# NINE

## ‘DESTROYING VALUE’?

### *Environmental Impacts of Global Production Networks*

#### APPLIED CASE STUDY

As noted in Chapter 9, waste recycling is a global business. However, it is not a universal one. Several studies have indicated that social identity, including gender, class and ethnic identity, can have an impact on the degree to which individuals recycle.

It has long been known in the social sciences that identity affects human behaviour, in business as much as anything else. Bourdieu wrote extensively on the way in which people express their social class identity through their behaviour, possessions and consumer choices. How this impacts on the recycling industry is a crucial question not only for the commercial interests involved, but also for the governments, NGOs and quangos with an interest in ensuring as wide a take-up of recycling as possible, leaving aside the wider moral and environmental issues of corporate social responsibility. Understanding the role of gender and class in the take-up of household recycling, and how to ensure that participation in household recycling programmes is as wide as possible across different identity groups, is thus of paramount importance.

Although most governments, at all levels, campaign to encourage all people to recycle, studies have been done which indicate that uptake is greater among certain groups than others. In particular, women recycle more than men, and middle-class people recycle more than working-class people, of both genders. Furthermore, on the international level, the populations of different countries also show different degrees of participation in recycling programmes. Various reasons have

been advanced as to why: Auger et al. imply, as regards class and national identity, that social values are the key determinant, with people's personal values about animal rights, human rights, globalization, labour participation, and so forth, affecting how positively they feel about recycling. One might also suggest that attitudes to waste and to gender roles within the household (the greater participation of women might have to do with their frequent association in the West with household maintenance tasks). The consequences are that there can be limited take-up of these programmes, despite the best efforts of governments and private companies, or a kind of 'ghettoization' of recycling.

The same studies, however, give some indication of what can be done to improve take-up. Bennett et al., for instance, found that class affects which incentives work best in terms of encouraging people to recycle, with working-class areas responding better to tangible rewards while middle-class areas respond more to social pressure; they suggest introducing systems of class-oriented rewards and penalties. Another approach might be to attempt to change the beliefs and values of the target group through advertising, education and information. However, one key issue is that, as Auger et al. note, a single aspect of identity is seldom enough to determine behaviour: this can be seen in Iyer and Kashyap's study of gender and recycling, which concluded that both information and incentives had a positive impact on recycling behaviour, but did not consider that their sample, being university students, was likely to be overwhelmingly middle class.

There are inevitably wider social implications on this. First, it suggests that different class groups, and arguably different genders and nationalities, have different relationships to globalization, and different attitudes to its implications. The idea of encouraging take-up of recycling across all barriers also raises the ethical issue of to what extent individual choices are to be respected and to what extent the community can influence individual behaviours. It also indicates that social identity has a strong impact on all aspects of economic and production behaviour, with particular implications in the areas of sustainability as well as conventional market-driven economics. The role of social identity, and what one can or should do to change it, thus plays a key role in the waste management industries.

The case of recycling take-up in North America and Western Europe thus indicates, first, the importance of personal identity to business in all areas, with consumer identity being significant in more areas than just marketing, and the identities of managers, corporations and communities also playing a role. Second, it shows how local issues can affect global behaviour; recycling may be global, but class and gender are predominantly experienced at the local level. Finally, however, it also indicates that behaviour is influenced by many identities at once, and that, to understand consumer ethical behaviour, one needs to look at multiple predictors of social behaviour to understand their activities.

## QUESTIONS

1. How might class and gender identity affect the expansion of other globalizing sectors discussed elsewhere in *Global Shift* (e.g. technology take-up, or CSR)?
2. Is encouraging individuals from all gender and class groups to recycle a worthwhile activity or a waste of time? Justify your answer.
3. Design a low-budget incentive/marketing programme to get the maximum number of people in your home community recycling. Comment on its strengths and weaknesses.
4. How significant is the problem of identity for the waste management industries?

## FURTHER READING

- Auger, Pat et al. (2007) Using best–worst scaling methodology to investigate consumer ethical beliefs across countries. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 70: 299–326.
- Bennett, Roger et al. (2008) Effective strategies for enhancing waste recycling rates in socially deprived areas. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 7 (1): 71–97.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1987) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Iyer, Easwar S. and Kashyap, Rajiv K. (2007) Consumer recycling: role of incentives, information, and social class. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 6 (1): 32–47.