STATE OF REUSE REPORT

It’s Time to Rethink Reuse™
Awareness and adoption of recycling have expanded rapidly over the past few decades, making an important contribution to environmental sustainability in North America and beyond. At the same time, attention to and understanding of the concept of “reuse” have lagged. This is surprising considering that, while both are important, reuse is in fact more impactful than recycling because it reduces the need for production and additional natural resources. Reuse is a critical action in a “circular economy,” which, as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation notes, relies on items staying “at their highest utility” and out of landfills.

To better understand perceptions and behaviors related to reuse, global thrift retailer Savers commissioned a survey of 3,000 North Americans. The survey revealed lingering misconceptions about the impact of reuse, especially for clothing and textiles, as well as a lack of awareness about the options available for keeping these items out of landfills. Overall, the survey found that people underestimate the power of reuse to protect the environment and support local communities.

On a positive note, the study also found that despite a lack of awareness and understanding about reuse, people have good intentions and a positive perception of those who practice reuse. Importantly, the findings underscore an opportunity for more communication and better education as a means of driving adoption of reuse.

Methodology
To gather insights into consumer perceptions and behaviors about reuse, Savers commissioned Edelman Intelligence to conduct a survey of a general population of consumers in the U.S. and Canada over age 18. A total of 3,097 people (1,634 in the U.S. and 1,463 in Canada) participated in an online survey from April 9 to April 17, 2016. The margin of error is +/-1.76 percent overall; in country comparisons it is +/-2.56 percent and in generational comparisons, +/-3.22 percent.

For more information about the data presented in the State of Reuse Report, contact: rethinkreuse@savers.com.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE STATE OF REUSE

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1 in 3 people who do not donate used goods say it’s just easier to throw things out.

4.7 survey response
8.1 actual

26 BILLION POUNDS going to landfill
Source: SMART

1 in 3 people don’t know that more than 90% of textiles can be reused or recycled.

The reuse industry employs nearly 100,000 workers and creates $1 BILLION in wages in the U.S. alone.

Source: Council for Textile Recycling

Number of trash bags of clothing and accessories U.S. consumers throw away each year:

4.7 survey response
8.1 actual

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KEY FINDINGS

1. Almost half of North Americans believe they have too much stuff.

2. Overflowing closets are the No. 1 prompt for people to donate their unwanted clothing.

3. Americans vastly underestimate the amount of used clothing and accessories they send to landfills each year: They report throwing away 4.7 trash bags worth, while the actual amount is nearly double at 8.1 trash bags.

4. Of people who do not donate used goods, one in three say it’s just more convenient to throw these items away.

5. More than half of North Americans surveyed say they are more likely to reuse clothing after hearing about the significant environmental impact of textile manufacturing.

6. Nearly half of North Americans say they would donate more if they knew their donation would help nonprofits they support.

7. Ninety-four percent of North Americans believe the concepts behind reuse should be taught in schools to increase sustainable habits in future generations.
The celebration of Earth Day each April 22 has helped raise awareness about the consequences of human actions on the planet. To avoid negative environmental impacts, we need to make smarter and more informed decisions when we do buy things. The second most important action is to reuse what has already been manufactured. Yet it is the third choice — recycling — that has become most common place with the proliferation of bins to collect cardboard, paper, glass, and aluminum.

It’s true that recycling has a magical appeal: Transforming pop bottles into park benches or sneaker soles into track surfaces is almost like alchemy. However, recycling also requires resources such as water and energy to recombine the ingredients into something new. It’s a worthy endeavor, but reuse, which doesn’t require such resources, is of a higher order and, from the standpoint of reducing environmental impact, should be the priority. Yet still many people believe that reuse and recycling are synonymous or are of equal value to the environment.¹³

As reuse continues to get less attention than recycling, landfills continue to pile up with goods that could have been reused.¹⁴ Of particular concern is the amount of reusable clothing and textiles that end up in the trash. In fact, the average U.S. citizen will throw away 81 pounds of clothing this year alone — 95 percent of which could have been reused or recycled.¹⁵ Ultimately, the U.S. singlehandedly contributes a staggering 26 billion pounds of clothing and textiles to landfills every year.¹⁶

Savers, a global thrift retailer, wanted to better understand current attitudes toward reuse in North America. It commissioned a survey to explore the state of reuse in the U.S. and Canada. A total of 3,097 people over the age of 18 (1,634 in the U.S. and 1,463 in Canada) participated in the online survey in April 2016.

The State of Reuse Report presents the resulting survey data and explores attitudes and behaviors on reuse, particularly for clothing and textiles. The purpose of this report is to better understand why people do and don’t practice reuse, and spark a conversation to identify ways to spur people to practice reuse. Because local communities and the environment both benefit when one person’s trash becomes another person’s treasure, more must be done to prompt people to “Rethink Reuse™.”

WHAT PEOPLE THINK VS. WHAT THEY DO

To test people’s perception of their actual clothing “footprint,” the survey asked people to estimate how much clothing and household goods they throw away each year.

Not surprisingly, there was a significant gap between perception and reality. While U.S. consumers believed they got rid of an average of 4.7 trash bags (or about 47 lbs. per person) of clothing and accessories in the previous year, the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles (SMART) nonprofit trade association calculates the average American actually throws away almost twice this amount, or 81 lbs. of clothing alone every year.2 That’s 81 lbs. of landfill space burdening the planet, and 81 lbs. of valuable natural resources lost to the economy, multiplied by 323.6 million Americans and 35 million Canadians.3,4

Further analysis reveals that this loss of 81 lbs. of clothing and textiles per person every year contributes to a missed economic opportunity. Once an item is dumped in the landfill, it loses its value and the value of the resources that went into making it.

The estimates provided by U.S. survey respondents on the value of their used goods that were not recycled or reused translates into approximately $88 billion lost. This is more than the GDP of Hawaii ($76.2 billion) and Saskatchewan ($59.3 billion), respectively.5,6 Given its contribution to helping goods maintain their value, reuse will need to be adopted more widely if there is to be faster progress toward achieving a circular economy.

WHY PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN THE REUSE CYCLE

Why they give: helping others

While it’s true that too much clothing ends up in landfills, more than three-quarters of North Americans do in fact reuse goods by donating them.

Why do they give? Running out of closet space was the leading reason North Americans were prompted to donate, beating out donation drives or passing by a drop box, clothing bin or donation truck as triggers to donate. In fact, when it comes to donating used goods, having no place to stash belongings at home is more motivating than either having to move or experiencing a change in marital status.

Once people do make the decision to donate, helping others outweighs convenience, sparing landfills or even tax write-offs. Sixty-four percent of Canadian respondents and 59 percent of U.S. respondents donate goods to benefit nonprofit organizations. Two-thirds of survey respondents said that the personal upside for donating used goods is knowing that others could find value in items they no longer needed. This feeling rose to 76 percent with the baby boomer generation. So even though the initial trigger to donate might be around organizing an overloaded closet and a need for space, people ultimately donate goods to help others.

2 of 3 people donate used goods knowing that others could find value in items they no longer need.
To find out what might make people increase donations of clothing and other goods, the survey asked about a range of possible motivations. Again, the impulse to help others won out: Nearly half of respondents said they would donate more if they knew their donation would help nonprofits they support. Helping others was a more compelling reason than knowing more about the environmental impact of the water, energy and chemicals that go into making the clothes — only 12 percent of respondents chose this reason.

The survey also found that some people chose not to donate used items at all. Of the 57 percent who threw items away, 54 percent did so because they didn’t think any donation center would take their items, and one in four did so because it was simply more convenient. While every organization has its own standards for what it accepts, the confusion about what can and cannot be donated may be an underlying reason why people throw away so much of their clothing. Educational campaigns clarifying the possibility of reuse might help capture some of these valuable resources.

### Why they buy used

In addition to donating unwanted used goods, another critical component of the reuse cycle is purchasing used goods.

Some people may not care about the tax write-off when they donate, but they’re definitely interested in the value they get by thrift-shopping. The main reason consumers purchase used goods is to save money (50 percent). When they purchase used goods, people are more likely to buy used books (46 percent), home goods and clothing (42 percent each), and are less likely to buy personal items like shoes (14 percent) and bedding and towels (8 percent).

To encourage more people to fully participate in the reuse cycle, including donating and shopping at thrift stores, the great savings and value these goods provide should be emphasized to customers.

#### Opportunities to educate and clear up misconceptions about reuse

### The opportunities for reuse

The survey revealed significant gaps between perception and reality, as well as intentions and actions, when it comes to reuse.

Fortunately, awareness is the first step, and there appears to be ample opportunity to make inroads through education and communication. Since two-thirds of North Americans don’t realize that reuse is a better solution than recycling, clearing up that misconception is a good place to start.\(^x\)

One in three people reported not knowing whether more than 90 percent of textiles could be reused or recycled, and 17 percent believed they could not be. Nine percent of those who do not donate noted that it is because they are not sure how or where to donate goods. The misinformation and perception about what can and cannot be donated is, perhaps, adding to the 26 billion pounds of textiles people send to landfills each year.\(^x\) People need to know that 95 percent of their unwanted or unneeded clothing and textiles can be reused or recycled.\(^x\)

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There is an opportunity to educate people who throw away used clothing because they think, mistakenly, that these items are not worthy of being donated to charity or cannot be reused or recycled. The good news is that 74 percent say they are more likely to donate more clothing and textiles if they know that many donation centers will take used clothing and textiles regardless of condition (with the exception of items that are wet, mildewed or contaminated with hazardous material).

Convenience is still important when it comes to donating unwanted goods as one in three people who do not donate used goods say it is just easier to throw things out. This is an opportunity for organizations committed to reusing clothing and textiles to reach out to people and continue to make the donation process more convenient and easier to participate in.

Environmental advantages of reuse

When people extend the useful life of their stuff by donating used items to nonprofits or buying used goods at secondhand stores, they are contributing to the circular economy and helping to reduce solid waste in landfills, pollution and the use of precious water and energy resources. This is an important goal and one that raises the question of how we can bring more people into this virtuous cycle.

One important finding is that, when reminded of the tremendous impact clothing has on the environment, three-quarters of baby boomer respondents would choose to wear a pre-owned outfit over wearing a brand new one that used thousands of gallons of water. But one-third of respondents did not care about the environmental impact and chose to wear the brand new outfit.

Not all hope should be lost on those who said they would rather wear the brand new outfit. Fortunately, the research demonstrates there is room to educate people on the environmental impacts.

More than half of North Americans surveyed say they are more likely to reuse upon hearing that, for example, each year more than a half trillion gallons of fresh water are used in the dyeing of textiles, and 70 million barrels of oil are used to produce the polyester used in fabrics.\textsuperscript{44}

A promising finding of the survey was that nearly all respondents unanimously agreed that the concepts of reuse should be taught in schools to increase sustainability habits. Ninety-four percent of respondents endorsed this idea.

Upside of reuse

The survey also highlighted an important emotional and perceptual upside to donating that could help to foster greater adoption of reuse. When people were asked how they feel after removing unwanted items from their home, results were strong for “accomplished” (49 percent), “productive” (45 percent), “refreshed” (29 percent), and “happy” (27 percent). When respondents were asked how they would describe people who regularly donate used goods, responses included high marks for “thoughtful” (68 percent), “generous” (67 percent) and “environmentally conscious” (49 percent). Not surprisingly, people perceive donating as a good thing, and it reflects well on those who do it. That being said, campaigns to increase the rate of donations could capitalize on this “feel good, look good” aspect of donating, in which everyone gains. This adds further evidence indicating the need to continue to educate people on how participating in the reuse cycle is beneficial for them, their families and communities. The fact that people already perceive donating as a good thing, and that it reflects well on those who do it, is likely to quicken the pace of adoption.

WORKING TOWARD A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Thankfully, people don’t have to go far to clean up the planet: They can start in their own closets. Instead of throwing out old T-shirts, they could — and should — rethink reuse, and consider donating these items to a nonprofit. Instead of buying brand new shirts, people can shop at a thrift store and add some nearly new or vintage ones to their wardrobes. In the circular economy, everybody wins, and the Earth doesn’t get trashed.

It’s time that reuse and the ability to reuse clothing and textiles receive similar attention to the stature recycling has reached in the last few decades. If people approach consumption differently and emphasize not only recycling but reuse, they can and will have a major impact and transition from the linear model of taking, making and disposing toward a more efficient circular model of reducing, reusing and recycling. This new circular economy values reuse and is restorative and regenerative for the planet and society as a whole.

Beyond its obvious environmental impact, the reuse industry helps local communities and the economy. By extending the life cycle of secondhand clothing, the reuse industry employs nearly 100,000 workers and creates $1 billion in wages in the U.S. alone. The global population is forecast to reach 9 billion people by 2030, creating an estimated trillion-dollar economic opportunity for the circular economy. The current path is unsustainable, and it’s time to start realizing the advantages of innovation, job creation and economic development that reuse and the circular economy can help create.

Data from the Savers survey underscores that many people are practicing reuse today, and that many more would do so if the benefits to the local community and environment were communicated more clearly, and if it was made more convenient to donate. These findings are a call to action for individuals, municipalities, businesses and the nonprofit sector to work together to educate people and put in place policies and approaches to promote wider adoption of reuse.

Nearly five decades after the original Earth Day celebration, much has been accomplished, but much more remains to be done. Expanding awareness and adoption of reuse deserves greater urgency, attention and action.

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Source: Council for Textile Recycling

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ABOUT SAVERS

Savers is a purpose-driven thrift retailer offering quality used clothing and household goods at our 330 stores in the U.S., Canada and Australia. We got our start more than 60 years ago from a commitment to reuse and supporting local communities. In the last year alone, we have helped divert more than 650 million pounds of material from landfills.

We purchase used clothing, household goods and textiles from nonprofit organizations to extend the life of used goods and reduce what ends up up in the landfill. Over the past 10 years, Savers has paid its collective nonprofit partners more than $1 billion, money that helps fund their missions.

To learn more about Savers’ commitment to reuse and local communities, visit rethinkreuse.com or savers.com/rethinkreuse.

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