

## “Recycling the Light Bulb Joke”

Broadcast on EnergizeGreen – August 22, 2009

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You know the old joke? How many not so bright people does it take to screw in a light bulb?

The answer is 101: One to hold the bulb and 100 to turn the house around.

Well, here's a new one: How many people does it take to make a positive difference in the health of our planet?

Before you answer that, you should know, Americans produced around 4.5 pounds of trash per person, each day in 2007, and 1.5 of those were recycled or composted. That savings adds up to around 85 billion tons, which is the energy equivalent of nearly 11 billion gallons of gasoline -- preventing greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to -- and visualize this: 35 million passenger vehicles. As crazy a lot as that seems, it still means there are plenty of people -- more than half of the US population -- who are NOT recycling or composting.

Funny, if this was a question of brushing teeth, or washing hair and say only half of us did this every day, we'd all notice. But since most Americans live in neighborhoods where trash isn't dumped, it's easy to have an out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality. It's also easy to assume that someone else - and fill in the stereotype here -- tree huggers or hippies or scientists, are doing all the recycling for the planet.

But now's the time to rethink old habits and consider smarter ways to do things -- the opposite of the lightbulb joke.

I've been surprised to discover that many of my own energy saving measures have been based on little more than assumption.

For example, when my kids have friends over, I usually load up on individual water bottles, figuring the amount of glasses we'd use if they drank from them instead, would fill the dishwasher -- and that would be a waste of both energy and water, right? Wrong. What I didn't understand, because I couldn't see it, is it takes massive quantities of oil -- enough to fuel around 10,000 cars, to make the bottled water most Americans drink each year. That doesn't even touch the pollution issue raised from transporting those bottles to your stores.

Speaking of pollution...Did you know that if you use a gas lawn mower thinking you're saving electricity, you're creating another problem? One hour of gas mowing causes as much air pollution as driving a car for four hours.

And even though you carpool, when you sit in the car with the engine running waiting for your kids, your emitting carbon dioxide -- and lots of it. If you spent 10 fewer minutes with your car engine idling, you'd emit around 550 pounds less of carbon dioxide each year.

At the grocery store -- buying milk in paper containers is not necessarily the smarter way to go either -- it turns out that the half-gallon plastic milk jugs use much less material, and have lower life-cycle greenhouse-gas emissions than glass or paper containers of the same size. Plastic milk jugs are also one of the most-recyclable waste products in the US whereas paper cartons are not.

So let's try the question again:

How many people does it take to make a positive difference in the health of our planet?

Only one -- You. And that's no joke.