

What Will You Be?

A rapidly growing company offers retailers a unique opportunity: close the loop by not only recycling, but also transforming the recycled material into new products.



It's hard not to notice Danny Schrage's business card. It's half the size of an ordinary card and there's an interesting, Zen-like line on the back that reads: In my other life, I was a paper cup. What will I be in my NextLife?



Danny Schrage,
founder and CEO

It's a statement/question that truly captures what Schrage's business, NextLife, is all about. The Morristown, Tenn.-based company not only recycles waste, it transforms it into something new. And for retailers trying to get a firm grip on recycling, NextLife offers a comprehensive and innovative program that closes the recycling loop by

repurposing plastic and other waste into new products retailers can use and sell.

Just as a paper cup became Schrage's business card, the roughly 40 billion plastic and metal garment hangers discarded by retailers annually can be transformed into items such as plastic bags, shopping carts, baskets, trash cans, recycling bins, pillows, and much, much more.

"The possibilities really are endless for this," said Schrage, NextLife's founder and CEO. "It crosses that critical boundary where it makes business sense because you're doing the right thing from a marketing and operational perspective, and you're communicating with your customers that you share their values on the environment. It's exciting, and there is much more to come."

The program

Before there was NextLife, there was Mountain Valley Recycling, a little company Schragger founded in 1987 to bring a new way of thinking to the industry. Over the years, Mountain Valley's recycling technology evolved, as did its ability to create new products out of the material it recycled. And just a few years ago, Schragger created NextLife as a sister company to Mountain Valley to focus on product development and production.

The timing couldn't have been better. Retailers across the country are searching for ways to launch or beef up their recycling programs, and NextLife can provide the customized, end-to-end solutions they're looking for

"Once we developed the concept of closing the loop, it was something that was very interesting to retailers, because they always had to worry about what to do with plastics," Schragger said. "Now, that challenge is gone because with our program, the retailers become the supply of the waste and the demand of the product. Once you have that, you can create a really consistent program."

The first step in NextLife's program is to sit down with retailers and understand their particular objectives and challenges. NextLife looks at all aspects of a retailer's operations and determines the best way to set up a recycling program where all plastics are collected from all locations.

The company provides pickup at waste consolidation points across the country, ships the plastics to its own recycling facilities, certifies and records all materials, and then transforms the plastic into a renewable resin.

But that is only one half of NextLife's program. The second half is about creating products retailers can use and sell. The company will sit down with a retailer's buyers and merchandisers and determine what products the retailer would like to make.

Said Schragger, "We can make just about anything. If you look at the waste retailers generate and the items they have on their shelves, they're both made of the same things. The stuff they sell is made from the same stuff they're throwing away."

Bags, shopping carts and baskets, recycling bins, trashcans, and can liners are among NextLife's most popular products. Although those are some of the more obvious items the company makes, NextLife even makes pillows with stuffing made from plastic bottles. A full line of house wares, lawn and garden, and garage products is set to launch next year.

"These aren't just products with green labels, they're incredibly green products made of materials that are traced and certified,"

Schragger said. "At NextLife, we make ordinary products into extraordinarily green products."

The benefits

NextLife's program isn't just about being green, it's about saving green.

Retailers have the opportunity to recycle, reduce waste, and reduce costs by becoming the source of the material that will be made into the products on their shelves.

And, Schragger noted, retailers also have the opportunity to build and promote their brand with the help of NextLife's unique messaging. All of NextLife's products take a cue from Schragger's business card, informing consumers what a particular item was in a former life and what it could become in the next.

"We did a survey asking people if they knew what happened to plastics when they go in the recycle bin," Schragger said. "We were shocked to find that 0% of people knew what happened to that plastic. We work hard to communicate with consumers and show them in a very tangible way that when they put plastics in our NextLife bins, they become a shopping cart, a carry basket, or other products. We've found our unique messaging engages shoppers, educates them, and gets them motivated to recycle and buy green." ♻️

