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Freecycle phenomenon piques corporate interests

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The Freecycle movement was founded in 2003, but it wasn't until late 2004 that interest in the idea really ignited. Now, Freecycle groups are popping up in communities, big and small, all across North America.

Now there are over 2,000 local groups, with anywhere from one to 13,000 members.

It all started in Tucson, Arizona, with a Deron Beal -- who's obsessed with recycling.

Before he started Freecycle, Beal worked for a non-profit recycling company (in fact he still works there, and manages the Freecycle movement in his spare time).

From his first day of work at the recycling gig, it drove Deron crazy to see perfectly good stuff being thrown away:

"I live here in the middle of the Sonora Desert, which is one of the most beautiful deserts in the world. And smack-dab in the middle of this desert, you've got this hideous landfill, half of which is full of perfectly good reusable stuff."

Whenever Beal ran across something he thought should be saved from the dump, he would find it a home -- be it an abandoned lawn chair, a lamp that needs some new wiring, a squeaky ironing board that needs a little oil here and there.

And then one day almost two years ago, Beal had an idea. He started sending e-mails about the stuff he'd found. One e-mail led to another, and that led to a website. He called it Freecycle and it's been growing ever since.

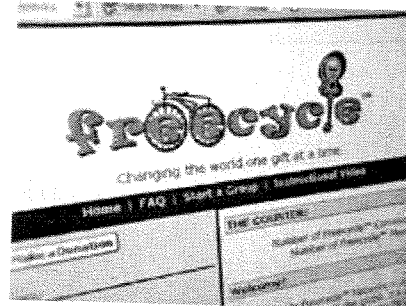
At an average of one pound per item, Beal says worldwide, the Freecycle movement manages to keep 40 tons of stuff a day out of the landfills.

"People have always said the Internet is going to become a democratic medium for people to get in touch and empower each other directly," says Beal. "That's what we're finally starting to see on the Internet -- a lot of grassroots efforts like this one that are really able to take off.

"And people locally at each city are able to take the reins themselves and really make it happen."

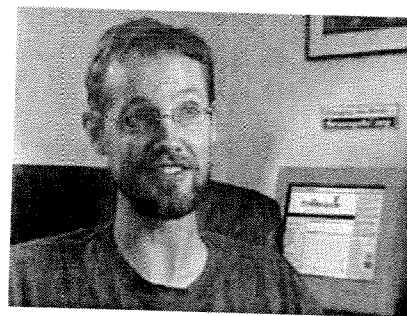
Corporate world comes courting

Beal's baby has gotten so big it's taking over most of the space in his home, and most of his spare time.



Freecycle communities are popping up in communities across North America.

LINK: [Freecycle groups in Canada](#)



Deron Beal, founder of Freecycle.

"We've got nearly a million members now," he says. "We've grown 2,300 per cent in the past six months, so you can figure that eight months down the line, we're going to have eight to 10 million people who are doing this."

So he's a tad enthusiastic. But there's no doubt Freecycle is growing, and fast. Which means the inevitable is happening: the corporate world wants a piece of the Freecycle action – and it's willing to pay for it.

Beal's negotiating a sponsorship deal with Waste Management Inc. (WMI), which Beal says is "one of the largest recyclers in the world."

Beal hopes the deal will bring in enough cash that he can quit his day job: "and my dream, of course, is to have enough money so that I can hire somebody to be doing the programming for the new web page."

So Beal's happy, but what do the members think of a corporate sponsor for Freecycle?

For Oshawa Freecycler Nancy Daniels, it all depends on the details: "If they leave it the way it is right now, it's going to be an awesome tool for a lot of people. If they start wanting to make money off of it, then I think we've got problems."

Beal agrees that Freecycle can only survive if it keeps its grassroots appeal: "There is absolutely no way I could find enough sponsors to pay for all the volunteers that are required in every city worldwide. It just would be a mind-boggling sum. So there's no doubt that this is and will remain a grassroots movement, or it'll just disintegrate."

Wes Muir is director of communications for Waste Management of Canada, the Canadian division of WMI. Headquartered in Burlington, Ontario, it's Canada's largest garbage collection, recycling and disposal company. Muir says that for about \$130,000 a year, the Freecycle website will feature a link to WMI.

"We jumped on to this program was because a lot of our commercial customers, we help them with waste reduction and how to reduce their waste in the plant before it gets disposed of," says Muir. "And we do a lot of that work on the recycling and we thought this is a nice service offering we can offer our customers."

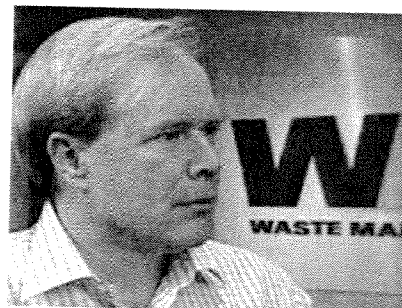
But could there be another incentive – a little recycling of the company's image, perhaps? After all, Waste Management of Canada is the same company that wanted to open a huge landfill in northern Ontario that would have taken some of Toronto's garbage.

Part of the debate surrounding the "Adams Mine" proposal focused on WMI's environmental record – in particular, fines for environmental violations at its landfills in the United States.

Wes Muir says he can't speculate on whether Freecycle's environmentally sensitive members will strike up against his company's sponsorship of the Freecycle movement. And he insists the company's not motivated to polish its image by making a connection with Freecycle.



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Wes Muir, director of communications for the Canadian division of Waste Management Inc.

ARTICLE: [Liberals bury Adams Mine landfill plan](#)

Muir says WMI is merely "trying to raise awareness among the public about the waste we generate. And to think beyond just dropping it off at the curb and walking away and saying, 'Well, my job is done.'"

Deron Beal insists on focussing on the positive too: "It's a beautiful thing to have a company step forward --that's into recycling-- and say, 'don't give us your recyclables, reuse it.' That's a pretty inspiring thing for a company to step forward and do."

Please also see: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7955511/> for more information on sponsorship money.