Hed: Changing Consumer Behavior, One Recyclable Tube at a Time
Dek: Colgate's new toothpaste tube is a sustainability breakthrough — and a design challenge.



Caption: You can't miss the messaging on the front of the tube — but the playful illustration, smile logo, and unpretentious typography keep the overall tone warm and lighthearted.

The idea: Tell a compelling story about Colgate's new recyclable toothpaste tube that turns innovation into action.

The result: Award-winning packaging that's leading the way for the rest of the portfolio and the industry at large.

For years, Colgate-Palmolive has had an ambitious goal: make toothpaste tubes part of the circular economy. With the rollout of Colgate's 100% recyclable tube, the company has made its biggest stride yet toward achieving that vision.

But it had to get the message out in the places that mattered most — in people's homes and in the facilities that sort plastic for recycling.

Colgate's recyclable toothpaste tube was an innovation more than five years in the making. Typically, toothpaste tubes are made from a mix of aluminum foil and plastic; while the combination makes them easily squeezable, it also prevents them from being recycled.

"We had to figure out how to design a tube that could be recycled at scale but also works as well as the tubes that billions of people use daily," Greg Corra, Worldwide Director of Global Packaging & Sustainability at Colgate-Palmolive, said.

Colgate's new tube is made from high-density polyethylene (HDPE), meaning that it can be tossed in the recycling bin alongside bottles of shampoo and laundry detergent. It's a major step forward as Colgate-Palmolive works to eliminate plastic waste across its portfolio and lay the groundwork for exciting future innovations.

The recyclable toothpaste tube wasn't just an engineering challenge, though. To ensure the tube was recycled, its design would need to make people feel confident recycling a product they'd spent their whole lives throwing in the trash — and do so in a way that felt approachable and uplifting.



Caption: The recycling journey of Colgate's new HDPE toothpaste tubes illustrates just how much of an impact they could have.

Reimagining through a recyclable lens

In February 2022, Colgate launched a six-month campaign in North America to roll out limited-edition "Recycle Me!" tubes for its best-selling product lines: Colgate Optic White Advanced Sparkling White, Colgate Cavity Protection, Colgate Max Fresh Cool, and Colgate Total Whitening.

The tubes themselves had to succinctly convey to consumers and recycling facilities that they should be recycled, not thrown in the trash. To be effective, the design needed to inspire action.

"The 'Recycle Me!' tube is designed to educate and engage consumers and the recycling community, who are both essential to progress," Dana Medema, Vice President & General Manager, Oral Care for Colgate-Palmolive in North America, said.

To tackle the challenge, Colgate's design team worked with agency partner Design Bridge on a "tube takeover," focusing on the packaging customers see every day when they brush their teeth.

“Once the tube is in the home, it serves a different purpose — it doesn't need to function like an outer carton, because once you purchase it, you know what you have,” Gerard Rizzo, Senior Global Design Manager, Oral Care at Colgate-Palmolive, said. “We wanted to use the real estate on the tube as a reminder that this is now a recyclable tube. But how do we do that in a way that feels aspirational as opposed to just functional?”

For one, they zeroed in on the universal symbol for recycling. Instead of arrows forming a circular recycling loop, three illustrated toothpaste tubes take their place. By including one single bold icon on the front of the tube, the communication is immediately clear: this tube can be recycled.

A version of the Colgate logo that features a smile under the brand’s name conveys a feeling of warmth and friendliness. Similarly, the typography for “Recycle Me!” is inviting and enthusiastic. “Typographically, we wanted it to look like someone had just written it by hand so that it had more of a human element to it,” Rizzo said.



Caption: The design is uncluttered and eye-catching, and the message translates seamlessly between product lines.

The beginning of a bright future

The recyclable tube is a crucial step toward Colgate-Palmolive's target of 100% recyclable, reusable, or compostable plastic packaging by 2025, but it's also blazing a trail for the rest of the industry.

Globally, more than 20 billion toothpaste tubes are thrown out annually — and changing that will take widespread buy-in from companies, consumers, and recycling facilities. That's why Colgate has shared its recyclable tube technology with the industry at large and engaged with the recycling community to ensure the new packaging is accepted and processed correctly.

By 2025, HDPE toothpaste tubes will be an everyday sight across the U.S.: Major toothpaste brands, which with Colgate account for 90% of the U.S. market, have publicly committed to making the switch in the coming years.

The transition is a business imperative as well as an environmental one, as retailers increasingly expect, and in some cases even mandate, recyclable packaging. Colgate's "Recycle Me!" tubes call out the brand's pioneering efforts in the category — all while looking great next to a sink.

Awards & Recognition

- 2022 Pentawards (Sustainable Design, Skin, Body & Health) — Gold Winner
- 2022 D&AD Awards (Packaging Design) — Shortlist
- First Toothpaste Tube to be Recognized by Association of Plastic Recyclers

Further Reading

- Colgate Rolls Out Monomaterial Recyclable Tube, Tells People to 'Recycle Me!' (Packaging World)
- Design Bridge New York collaborates with Colgate for its Recyclable Toothpaste Tube
- Colgate Breaks Down Its New Recyclable Toothpaste Tube (Dieline)
- Colgate Introduces 'Recycle Me!' Recyclable Toothpaste Tube (Packaging Gateway)
- Colgate Has 20 Billion Reasons to Make Toothpaste Tubes Recyclable (Bloomberg)
- Colgate Finally Launched Its Recyclable Toothpaste Tube. It's Made from the Same Type of Plastic as Milk Jugs (CNN)
- Colgate Begins Roll Out of Its Recyclable HDPE Toothpaste Tube in the US (happi)