

Making Ripples

FreeCycle Thieves or Eco Entrepreneurs?

by Amanda Bancroft

FreeCyclers be warned: some free gifts come with strings attached.

According to the main website, FreeCycle.org, “The Freecycle Network™ is made up of 5,121 groups with 7,117,991 members around the world. It's a grassroots and entirely nonprofit movement of people who are giving (and getting) stuff for free in their own towns. It's all about reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills.” The organization does allow items acquired from FreeCycle to be sold online later, and encourages resellers to announce their intention to sell, according to their Moderator Manual. “With Freecycle, there are no strings attached.”

So what exactly are the strings? Local FreeCycle groups may choose to monitor the recipient's use of items acquired from FreeCycle. They can either state that reselling items is not permitted (items gifted are intended solely for reuse, not resale) or outright ban anyone “caught” reselling items. These resellers are called immoral thieves, and some consider their actions to be the same as stealing. Why would anyone be upset when something they got rid of and didn't want to deal with anymore is later being sold online? Well, it's complicated.

FreeCyclers may feel like someone is taking advantage of their kindness if gifted items are later resold. It feels good to know that their item is being passed on for free from one needy person to the next, and it feels bad to know that they could've earned money from selling the item, but didn't take the time to post it for sale, so someone else gets the money and they don't. They have an expectation that their gift is truly helping someone in dire need, and if that someone is trying to be an eco entrepreneur and earn income for their family by selling recycled items online, they look less helpless and less needy, so it feels less good to give to them. Also, some online sellers may pretend to be in need of something and make frequent requests for items. Yet others take items and craftily upcycle them into new treasures for their online store.

FreeCycle itself makes no distinction between giving the item to your friend, your dog, or selling it to your customer. Recycling, in general, is open to a variety of creative uses including eco entrepreneurship. Should we have a moral say in a person's ability to recycle an object any way they choose?

If you do sell an item from FreeCycle in your online business, state your intention to do so following the FreeCycle guidelines. If you don't want people reselling your items, consider donating to a charity. And remember that reselling an item from FreeCycle is still keeping unwanted stuff out of the landfill while helping people earn income in a way that doesn't harm the planet. Consider joining the NWA FreeCycle group on Facebook, which has 1,335 members!

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