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GREENWorks

Ideas for a Cleaner Environment

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Shake and Fold, and Save 571 Million Paper Towels

This month we share with you a waste-reducing tactic that is genius in its simplicity, and yet the result is anything but simple. Just remember these three words: Shake and Fold.

This method has the potential to revolutionize our public and workplace bathroom habits by showing a practical and effective way to only use one paper towel to dry your hands after washing. If you're like most people, that sounds quaint and, honestly, not realistic. Most people tug at the paper towel dispenser in the bathroom a good three or four times until they have a big ball of absorption in their hands. It doesn't matter the dispenser, one of those self-cutting ones or an automatic (you just keep waving those hands until you have as many as you want!), we always grab a handful. And, like most people, you probably feel you could never get both hands dry with one small square of thin paper.

The Shake and Fold method will open your eyes to just how wrong we all are. It will also save a ton of trash; well, actually about 286 tons. According to John Smith of Portland, Oregon – a former district attorney and “powerful advocate for proper paper towel use,” according to his TED Talk profile – 13 billion pounds of paper towels are used every year in America. If everyone used just one paper towel instead of the usual handful, it would save 571,230,000 pounds of paper towels a year. It would also keep up to 16 grams of CO2 out of the atmosphere each time you dry your hands. For a 10-person office, this can add up to 120,000 grams each year, or the equivalent of 265 pounds.

We've been delaying long enough, now it's time to reveal the method. Grab a pen; you'll want to take notes. (Not really.)

1. Wash your hands.

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2. SHAKE your hands over the sink 12 times(to get rid of excess water).
3. Grab one paper towel
4. FOLD the towel in half and dry your hands.
5. Marvel in how dry your hands are.

Why fold the towel? Water molecules like to stick together and fill empty spaces when getting absorbed, so the tiny space between the layers helps hold more water.

Some people may read this and say, “Why use paper at all? Wouldn’t a hand dryer be more environmentally friendly?” Well, not everyone has access to a hand dryer and even when you do, it’s not 100% certain the dryers are the greener choice. There have been plenty of studies on the topic – measuring materials, manufacturing, transport, use and waste – and the most common answer is that if you have the newest, most efficient hand dryers on the market, they beat out paper towels. However, if everyone just used one paper towel, the paper product would be about equal on the “green scale.”

Another important consideration is the effectiveness, and according to some studies, paper towels win that contest. Hand drying is just as important as hand washing in the effort to remove bacteria, and the transmission of bacteria is more likely to occur from wet skin than from dry skin, according to the [Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research](#). Mayo also notes: Most studies suggest that paper towels can dry hands efficiently, remove bacteria effectively and cause less contamination of the washroom environment. From a hygiene viewpoint, paper towels are superior to electric air dryers.

So, take a look at [Smith's TED Talk video](#) and try it yourself. You’ll believe it when you see it.

And as he says at the end of his presentation: “Next, toilet paper.”

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