KEYSTONE environmental solutions

WHITE PAPER 02

Paying for Air: Right-Sizing Containers and Service Frequency

How to match container size and pickup schedules to the waste you actually produce, and stop paying to haul empty space.

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Key takeaways

- Front-load service is priced by container size and pickup frequency, not by how much waste is inside. Half-empty pickups cost the same as full ones.
- Compactors and roll-offs carry a haul fee every time they are emptied. Hauling at half weight roughly doubles your cost per ton for that fee.
- Undersized service is costly too, through overfill charges and extra pickups.
- A two- to four-week fullness audit is usually enough to find the right size and schedule.

How you are billed

Most commercial waste service falls into three types, and each is priced differently:

- **Front-load containers** (typically 2 to 8 cubic yards) are billed by container size and the number of pickups per week. The price is the same whether the container is full or nearly empty.

- **Roll-off containers** (typically 10 to 40 cubic yards) are billed per haul, plus disposal by the ton and often a daily or monthly rental.
- **Compactors** are billed per haul plus disposal by the ton, with equipment rental or ownership costs on top.

In every case, part of what you pay is for capacity and trips, not for the waste itself. That is where the savings are.

The fullness problem

Pickup schedules are usually set when service starts and rarely revisited. Business changes, recycling programs pull volume out of the trash, and seasonal swings come and go, but the truck still comes three times a week. The result is containers that are routinely half full at pickup. That is paying to haul air.

The opposite problem is just as expensive. An undersized container overflows, which leads to overfill charges, extra pickups at premium rates and, sometimes, litter and pest problems around the enclosure.

How to measure what you really generate

1. **Run a fullness audit.** For two to four weeks, have staff photograph each container just before pickup and record how full it is: a quarter, half, three-quarters or full.
2. **Note the pattern by day.** Many businesses produce more waste early in the week or after weekend trading. A schedule that matches the pattern beats one that is evenly spaced.
3. **Use weight tickets.** For compactors and roll-offs, review scale tickets. Consistently light hauls mean the container is being emptied too often.
4. **Account for recycling.** If you have added or expanded recycling, the trash container may now be far too large.
5. **Plan for seasonality.** Agree in advance on how service will step up and down for busy and slow periods.

Two illustrative examples

A front-load container

A sample retail location has an 8-yard container picked up three times a week, which is 24 cubic yards of capacity. A fullness audit shows it averages 45% full at pickup, or about 11 cubic yards of actual waste per week. Moving to a 6-yard container picked up twice a week provides 12 cubic yards of capacity, about 90% used.

SERVICE	WEEKLY CAPACITY	AVERAGE FULLNESS	SAMPLE MONTHLY COST
8 yd, 3x per week (before)	24 yd³	45%	$780
6 yd, 2x per week (after)	12 yd³	90%	$430
Difference			**$350 a month, $4,200 a year**

A compactor

A sample distribution site hauls its 30-yard compactor every week at about 3.5 tons per haul. The compactor can hold roughly twice that. Switching to hauls every other week, when it is close to full, cuts the number of hauls in half. At a sample haul fee of $250, that saves about $540 a month, or about $6,500 a year, while disposal tonnage stays the same.

Sample figures for illustration only. Actual pricing varies by market, hauler and material.

Right-sizing without risk

Right-sizing should never leave you with overflowing containers. The safest approach is to change one thing at a time, keep photographing containers for a few weeks after the change, and agree with the hauler on how to request extra pickups if they are needed.

How Keystone helps

Keystone reviews every container, service level and location as part of a free savings analysis. We recommend the right size and schedule, negotiate the change with your hauler, and keep monitoring pickup levels so service stays matched to your business as it changes.

Get your free savings analysis

Send us your most recent waste invoice for all locations. We will compare your pricing with similar Keystone clients and review our findings with you within 48–72 hours.

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