



WE WANT YOU TO RECYCLE

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO GET THE GENERAL PUBLIC TO RECYCLE? TALKING ABOUT THE BENEFITS TO THE EARTH OR MAKING IT PART OF BEING A GOOD CITIZEN? OUR AUTHORS UNDERTOOK A NATIONAL SURVEY TO FIND THE ANSWERS.

BY DONNA LYBECKER AND MARK MCBETH

Government officials and public policy decision makers today work in a world of marketing-based policy. In other words, just like consumers who are sold goods and products based on brand image, most constituents are sold on policies due to how the policies are “promoted” or “marketed,” rather than based on in-depth research of a topic. It is possible to see this trend through the use of slogans or the fact that politicians and political parties spend years and millions of dollars, honing and communicating them. This marketing is done in order to dictate the terms of local, regional and national debates concerning issues ranging from security to sustainability – including recycling.

Living in the rural Western U.S., the reality of this selling of specific constructions of sustainability policies is very apparent. When looking at the issue of recycling, many politicians and administrators in the West often link recycling to such issues as climate change and global responsibility. Experience suggests that such a strategy is politically ineffective because of policy “disconstruers” – those interest groups, bloggers, elites, and others, that, at best highlight only one side of the story and, at worst, manipulate facts to support their opinions. This strategy is also often unsuccessful because of a political culture in the Western U.S. that often resists globalization and large-scale environmental policies like sustainable development. In short, in much of this region, global

and environmental definitions of recycling strengthen the hand of opponents and policy disconstruers, and do not help recycling supporters make their case. Thus, it is apparent that how administrators educate citizens about recycling – and the possibility of communicating recycling messages – in a manner resistant to ideological divisions is important and needs to be studied for the benefit of recycling educators and administrators.

A few “good citizens”

With the intention of investigating the role of language and marketing “stories” concerning recycling, we put together a survey that attempted to tease out the effect different types of language have on educational effectiveness for recycling – in other words, does the type of story told about recycling impact how individuals view recycling? And, do different stories have different levels of success in educating people? Our hope is that by identifying the role of language and stories, recycling educators and administrators will be able to lessen the impact of those that look to warp their message.

In order to accurately reflect the types of language or story used, we utilized Russell Dalton’s work on citizenship. Dalton, author of *“The good citizen: how a younger generation is reshaping American politics,”* uses survey data to argue that in the U.S. there are changes in how young people perceive a “good citizen.” Where-

as, traditionally, U.S. citizens viewed good citizenship as consisting of a duty-based orientation of voting, serving on juries, reporting crime and performing watchdog functions, Dalton finds that a second group – generally the younger generation – increasingly defines good citizenship as more active, direct participation. Duty-based citizens are wary of government, but also more trusting of it. On the other side of this, engaged citizens believe that government is a positive force but they are less trusting of government – often preferring their own direct action over governmental action.

How the West was ... studied

Our study consisted of two phases: Originally focusing specifically on students, faculty and staff at Idaho State University (ISU), then moving to a nationwide survey of administrators, educators and researchers involved in recycling. The initial hypothesis suggested young people, even in a conservative, rural, Western state like Idaho, would respond positively to the marketing of recycling in global and participatory ways. Conversely, older individuals would respond positively to the marketing of recycling in the more duty-based ideas of individual responsibility and business-like concerns such as efficiency. We conducted two studies at ISU, with a total sample of approximately 580 respondents.

Our findings, consistent with Dalton, showed that Democratic and politically-liberal individuals responded most favorably to the engaged citizen recycling story which included elements of global citizenship, fighting global climate change and recycling as a way to get involved. Republicans and conservatives were not generally supportive of these definitions of recycling. What was surprising, however, was that the duty-based story was supported by Republicans and conservatives, but also supported by liberals and Democrats. Within these studies three elements of a duty-based narrative were consistently supported by both conservatives and liberals: Recycling as an element of individual responsibility; recycling as good business sense; and recycling as demonstrating efficiency. Conversely, with all the elements of the engaged citizen narrative, liberals were significantly more supportive of recycling as a way to combat climate change, a way to exercise global citizenship and a way to get involved the community.

From a practical standpoint, our data suggested that framing recycling in terms of individual responsibility, efficiency and good business sense was the most effective way to move the discussion of recycling out of the divisive ideological realm that permeates much environmental policy discussion. Thus, instead of emphasizing the global, participatory and climate change elements of recycling (even though it did resonate with university faculty and staff who were more engaged citizens), the emphasis of duty-based elements build considerable support for recycling across political ideological and partisan divisions.

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the U.S., the majority of the university staff, and the vast majority (90 percent) of students in our sample, were native Idahoans. This observation led to the second phase of the study, attempting to discern if these same trends would hold true outside of rural Idaho; if there were regional and urban-versus-rural differences in how recycling could be most effectively framed; and, overall, if an engaged citizen frame of recycling would play better than a duty-based frame across the U.S. In order to answer these questions, a survey was conducted of recycling administrators, educators and researchers from across the U.S. This group of individuals was asked if they believed the duty-based or engaged citizen story would be a more effective way to educate citizens, and if either of these stories were better than the more traditional use of science and statistics.

Communicating recycling to recyclers

In our survey, respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of a duty-based citizen recycling story, an engaged citizen recycling story and a scientific/statistical recycling statement. Respondents were then asked to choose the single story or statement that they believed would be most effective. In addition, respondents were asked questions about citizenship derived from Dalton and the famed “Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID)” survey undertaken by Center for Democracy and Civil Society (CDACS) at Georgetown University in 2005. These statements were used to determine the citizenship views of recycling administrators. Finally, the survey asked various demographic questions. With the cooperation of the Curbside Value Partnership, an email was sent to recycling professionals throughout the U.S.

Our initial national sample of 235 recycling administrators, educators and researchers was composed of 65 percent females, 58 percent age 36-55, and primarily employed as administrators and educators. Forty-four percent of our sample was liberal, 35 percent conservative and 21 percent moderate. Similarly, 47 percent were Democratic, 29 percent Republican, and 24 percent Independent. In terms of the citizenship profiles of our sample, survey results reflected a moderate, very weak duty-based citizen. Results also demonstrated that ideology was related to a respondent’s citizenship score with liberals more likely to score more on the engaged side of the scale and conservatives likely to score more on the duty-based side of the scale. These findings are consistent with results from both the earlier ISU study and Dalton.

In rating overall educational effectiveness, the science statement was highest rated in terms of educational effectiveness, 67 percent agreed that the story was an effective educational tool. This was followed by the duty-based narrative (65 percent) and the engaged-citizen narrative (57 percent). Ideology or partisanship played no role in how the respondents rated the effectiveness of the three choices. Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences within the rural or urban subgroups in terms of rating the effectiveness of stories. However, interestingly, respondents who worked in rural communities rated the effectiveness of science higher than did respondents who

worked in more urban communities. Furthermore, duty-based stories were rated the highest in the Southeast and science was rated highest in the combined region of the Midwest and Northeast. Finally, when respondents were asked to choose the single most-effective educational strategy, the duty-based narrative was the choice of the 48 percent of respondents, followed by the science statement (33 percent) and the engaged citizen narrative (19 percent). Interestingly the regional and population distinctions disappeared when respondents were asked to choose the single most effective educational strategy.


Duty-bound?

Results from both phases of this study show that overall, ISU students, faculty and staff and recycling professionals believed that a duty-based frame of recycling is most effective, although the scientific based story also had strong support. Most likely, based on this data, recycling education should use a combination of narrative

elements based in a duty-based story along with accurate recycling statistics and other data. Thus we conclude that recycling requires continual studies on its efficiency, its costs and benefits, its energy savings, and other important factors that researchers and policy analysts must provide. Local governments, for example, cannot afford to subsidize recycling programs unless some cost efficiencies can be demonstrated. Additionally, these studies demonstrate that certain recycling stories (efficiency, individual responsibility, good business sense) produce ideological consensus and are viewed as most effective in educating citizens about recycling.

Policy analysts are taught that they are not advocates but rather neutral trustees of the public interest. Unfortunately, policy analysts that lack political communication skills in how they present their information are likely to face many of the same problems that scientists do when they present empirical findings that are ignored or quickly manipulated by others. Thus a criticism of our recommendation that

scientists and analysts think about how to best frame their policy arguments: Often in recent years policy and politics have been viewed as too intertwined. Is taking these results into account a form of manipulation; does it make those who follow such suggestions disconstruers? With these results, we are not arguing that analysts should transform their role to one of advocate. Instead, we suggest that politics and values are an important part of the policy process and that analysts must be aware of the values behind their policy prescriptions.

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