

Recycling Online



When municipal recycling started taking off in the early 1980s, a key strategy employed for encouraging participation was the widespread and regular dissemination of public information about new programs. I can recall discussions over whether enforcement of mandatory recycling ordinances was even necessary, as long as there were vigorous public information campaigns.

A decade later, however, many local jurisdictions were finding that increased public information efforts often did not yield significant, long-term participation improvements. It was at this point that interest began to grow in the potential application of social marketing strategies to building recycling participation and collection rates.

In its most basic sense, social marketing is a discipline that seeks to fuse principles founded on sound commercial marketing and social psychology research to encourage voluntary behavior that benefits the individual or the community. Many aspects of social marketing were first developed for purposes such as the promotion of important public health goals and then later adapted through numerous projects for enhancing recycling program effectiveness. It should be noted that social marketing is not the same as social media. The latter, such as Facebook and Twitter, represent just some of the channels that can be used by social marketing while, conversely, much of the content of social media has no social marketing purpose of any kind.

Getting started

Let's assume that you have no familiarity with how social marketing works and how it can be applied to recycling. A good starting point would be the social marketing section of the North Carolina Division of

Making recycling a habit

by Roger Guttentag

Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (NCDPPEA) website. It starts with an overall discussion of what the practice is – based heavily on the work of Doug McKenzie-Mohr, the author of “Fostering Sustainable Behavior” – and what the four critical steps are for its implementation:

- Identify barriers
- Select strategies
- Conduct pilot programs
- Assess effectiveness

You can also see how these social marketing principles are being applied by the State of North Carolina on its RE3.org site.

Here you will find audio-visual presentations and a variety of information resources including a link to a webinar, “Using Community-Based Social Marketing to Increase Participation in Campus Recycling Programs” which starts off with a 30-minute introductory presentation on social marketing basics by Jay Kassirer of Cullbridge Marketing and Communications.

Digging deeper

For a more interactive guide to social marketing, the Tools of Change website offers a number of community-based social marketing instruments, particularly for those who register with the site. The various types of tools are organized into two main categories, called Nuts and Bolts and Multi-Faceted Approaches, which can be employed to achieve an effective implementation of social marketing.

The Tools of Change site also provides a Planning Guide, also accessed from the home page, that allows you to name and save your social marketing plan. There are seven main steps to be followed starting with setting objectives and concluding with measuring achievements. Within each step is a series of described subtasks for which you can enter your own response to how you would implement each subtask.

It's also about what's in your head

We like to think that our behavior is motivated by primarily rational thinking. How-

ever, the work that has been done by many social psychologists shows that our behaviors are also heavily influenced by non-rational factors such as unconscious motivations and impulses. For this reason, I think it's worthwhile to review “The Psychology of Sustainable Behavior,” by Christie Manning, found on the Minnesota Pollution Control Board site. Manning's paper discusses the psychological underpinnings of social marketing, such as the role of social cues, perceptual barriers and positive reinforcing feedback.

Keep America Beautiful (KAB) also addressed the psychological dimension of developing recycling habits through a series of presentations by psychologists at its October 2011 Symposium “Re: Psychology – Making Recycling Second Nature.” A follow-up to this symposium was then presented in the form of two webinars in 2012 that continued the dialogue on how the findings from psychological research as well as marketing can be applied for encouraging persistent behavior change favoring waste reduction values. The conference and webinar presentations are available for online viewing or download from the KAB site.

Some case studies

Many of the websites that have been described so far have large libraries of examples about how to use social marketing principles. There are also some stand-alone case studies that are worth looking at. One example is the final report prepared by Skumatz Economic Research Associates (SERA) prepared for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The report, “Getting the Most from Colorado's Recycling Programs & Infrastructure,” describes the social marketing work that was undertaken in the City of Broomfield, Colorado on two recycling collection routes with a third one used as a control involving a total of 1,500 households. The principal difference between the two routes that received social marketing outreach was that residents on one route had additional personal contacts, such as door-to-door visits. The scope of work also included a six-month monitoring of recycling and waste collection tonnages, a discussion of the environmental impact and net

economic value of the results achieved and the development of a social marketing tool kit document that can also be downloaded for review.

Another interesting case study on the recent use of social marketing can be found on the site for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. The report details a University of Alberta effort to improve diversion rates in student residences. The university had instituted a comprehensive recycling and organics collections system but was experiencing problems with low participation, contamination and complaints about its operation. The case study presents the four implementation phases and timelines that were followed, changes that were made based on the application of social marketing principles and results that were achieved.

Some additional resources

There are two additional notable news and information resources on social marketing. The first is a blog maintained by R. Craig Lefebvre, called On Social Marketing and Social Change. Dr. Lefebvre is a consultant and a faculty member of the University of South Florida who has published a number of articles and presentations on social marketing, including some that can be found in some of the sites I have mentioned. The other is the website of the International Social Marketing Association which also has its own blog. Both sites provide useful information in the form of articles and news items concerning projects, new development and events such as conferences and webinars.

Web Address Directory

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| AASHE – Take Action on Waste | tinyurl.com/AASHEWaste |
| Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment – Getting the Most from Colorado’s Existing Recycling Programs | tinyurl.com/CORecycling |
| Fostering Sustainable Behavior | tinyurl.com/CBSMFoster |
| International Social Marketing Association | tinyurl.com/ISMABlog |
| Keep America Beautiful – 2011 Symposium – Making Recycling Second Nature | tinyurl.com/KAB2ndNature |
| Keep America Beautiful Webinars – Creating Recycling Habits | tinyurl.com/KABHabits |
| Minnesota Pollution Control Agency: The Psychology of Sustainable Behavior | tinyurl.com/MPCAPsych |
| North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance – Social Marketing On Social Marketing and Change (Blog) | p2pays.org/socialmarketing tinyurl.com/SocialMarketingBlog |
| On Social Marketing and Social Change | tinyurl.com/SocialMarketingChange |
| Reduce.Reuse.Recycle.Org (North Carolina) | re3.org |
| Tools of Change | toolsofchange.com |

Final thoughts

I see the need for continued innovations in the use of social marketing for supporting overall state and local waste reduction policies. First, future capital spending by municipalities on new technologies will be constrained by political limitations placed on the growth of public revenue sources, such as taxes and fees. This places a greater emphasis on getting more done with current infrastructure assets as mentioned, for example, in SERA’s Broomfield, Colorado report. Second, and even more importantly, the success of ambitious long term waste reduction goals such as zero waste policies that

many communities have adopted will depend more on changes in values and behaviors that reflect those values than technological solutions. For this reason, the successful implementation of social marketing strategies will make a critical contribution to this end goal.

Roger M. Guttentag is a recycling and solid waste consultant located in Harleysville, Pennsylvania. He can be contacted at (610) 584-8836 or rguttentag@comcast.net. Guttentag has a website, recyclingandreuse.com, which houses all of his Recycling Online columns and other resources for recycling professionals of all stripes.