

The Dunkin Donuts Strategy for Maximizing Recycling by Office Employees

Background

In the late 1990's, the Town of Plymouth, Massachusetts added mixed paper to its existing white paper recycling program at Town Hall. Recycling Coordinator Mary Farrell wanted to maximize usage of the expanded program by Town Hall employees. She also wanted to build commitment to the program among Town Hall custodians. The strategy that Mary developed addressed several factors that have been shown to influence recycling behavior:

Barriers to Recycling

Lack of Knowledge. People's knowledge of how and/or what to recycle is linked to their level of participation. As expected, those who are less knowledgeable about how and what to recycle are less likely to participate, or tend to recycle less material.¹

Lack of Motivation. Participants in focus groups conducted around Boston, Massachusetts, and respondents in a 2000 statewide phone survey of Massachusetts residents indicated that laziness (i.e. lack of motivation) was a reason they did not recycle.²

Motivations for Recycling

Perceived Effectiveness of Recycling. The more that people see recycling as effective, the more likely they are to participate, or to participate more fully. In one example, residents of Claremont, California were asked the question, "How effective do you think recycling can be as a means of reducing trash sent to the dump?" Frequent recyclers rated recycling as more effective than infrequent recyclers.³

Peer Pressure. In a residential setting, people are motivated to recycle by actual pressure they receive from family and friends to do so. Furthermore, simply knowing that family, friends and neighbors recycle increases our likelihood of recycling.⁴ It is reasonable to think that peer pressure could be influential in an office setting, too.

The Strategy

The strategy that Mary developed used a number of behavior change tools to overcome the barriers and strengthen the motivations listed above.

In order to overcome lack of knowledge about what could be recycled in the expanded program, notices were sent to Town Hall employees informing them of the new items accepted. Further, Mary taped a sign to each employee's desk side trash receptacle that read, "NO PAPER." This sign communicated instructions for the desired behavior in **clear and specific terms**. The message also made it **easy for people to remember what to do and how and when to do it**. The signs further functioned as a **prompt**, reminding employees to

participate fully as they became accustomed to recycling the new materials accepted in the expanded program.

Mary also used **personal contact**, along with tongue-in-cheek humor, to promote full participation in the Town Hall recycling program. “I’m here to check your trash barrel,” she’d joke as she went about her daily business in Town Hall. Mary was a **credible messenger**. She had relationships with many employees in Town Hall; they knew her as someone with a sense of fun, and they trusted her not to embarrass or humiliate them.

In addition, Mary used both **monetary and non-monetary incentives** to increase employees’ motivation to participate fully in the expanded program. Each week for several months, custodians picked the employee on each of the three floors at Town Hall who was doing the best job of recycling. Town Hall custodians, who emptied desk side trash and recycling containers each evening, were in an ideal position to identify employees who were doing an outstanding job of diverting paper from the waste stream.

Mary knew that consumption of Dunkin Donuts coffee was ubiquitous at Town Hall, so she rewarded each of these star recyclers with a small but valued gift: a coupon for one cup of Dunkin Donuts coffee. She also sent out an email to all Town Hall employees recognizing the star recyclers of the week. “If you see John Smith enjoying a cup of Dunkin Donuts coffee,” she wrote, “it was his reward for doing such a great job of recycling this week!” If an employee hadn’t been recycling at all, and began to do so, he or she was automatically recognized as the star recycler on the floor the following week. At the end of the campaign, Mary recognized one city government department (e.g., the Tax Collector’s Office) that had done the best job of recycling overall. This type of widespread public recognition made conscientious recycling behavior more visible within Town Hall as well, **creating positive norms** – or in other words, strengthening peer pressure – around recycling.

Plymouth Town Hall custodians tended to view the recycling program as something that added to their workload. At the beginning of the promotional campaign, Mary gave each custodian a \$5 book of Dunkin Donuts coupons as a gesture of appreciation for their role in the operation of the recycling program. Further, asking the custodians to pick the outstanding recyclers was intended to **increase their commitment to the program by actively involving them** in its promotion. Instances have occurred in office recycling programs in which custodians fail to keep paper recycled by employees separated from the trash. Sometimes it is easier and quicker for them to dispose of everything together. However, undoing employees’ efforts to participate in a program that one had helped to promote would be likely to create a good deal of mental discomfort. Finally, the custodians’ overall impression of Town Hall employees revolved around real or perceived employee habits that made their jobs harder. Having

the custodians identify outstanding recyclers also helped them see what employees were doing right.

When Mary approached the Town Hall custodians to ask for their help in identifying outstanding recyclers, the custodians suggested additional steps they would be willing to take to provide feedback to Town Hall employees. As they made their evening rounds, they would leave reminders on the desks of employees who weren't recycling at all. If the behavior continued, they would notify Mary so that she could talk with the non-participants. It is not entirely clear why the custodians offered to do this additional work. It's possible that the act of leaving notices reminding errant employees to recycle brought with it a certain sense of power. Custodial positions, after all, carry with them little or no authority.

Mary helped Town Hall employees see recycling as effective in reducing trash by providing them with **feedback** on the impact of their new mixed paper recycling habits. In her weekly email recognizing the star recyclers, she also let employees know how many bags of trash had been diverted from the landfill due to the mixed paper program and how much money had been saved that week as a result.

Strategy Results

When the Town introduced white paper recycling in its government buildings prior to this campaign, the program cut the trash disposed of in Town Hall by one half. When the Town expanded the program to include mixed paper and carried out the strategy described above, the trash disposed of in Town Hall decreased by three quarters compared to the quantity before any recycling began. Since the campaign was launched at the same time that mixed paper was added, the effect of the campaign per se' on trash reduction is unclear. However, observations suggest that the campaign created a tremendous amount of buzz around Town Hall (and not just caffeine buzz!). This **social diffusion** may well have played a role in disseminating information and developing supportive norms.

Additional Research Needed

Because the introduction of new recyclable items made it impossible to discern the effects of the strategy alone, it would be worthwhile to test the effectiveness of this strategy in an established mixed office paper recycling program. It would also be important to determine if any change in recycling habits endures once the incentives and recognition are discontinued. There is general agreement among researchers that short-term monetary incentives, such as lotteries that reward a random recycler for his or her efforts, do not tend to produce lasting behavior change. Recycling rates return to prior levels when the incentive is no longer available.⁵ However, there were indications in Plymouth that the recognition that accompanied the Dunkin Donuts coupons was especially meaningful to Town Hall employees. Many of them are support staff who don't receive much

recognition or appreciation for their work. It is possible that the recognition given to outstanding recyclers may have led to feelings of intrinsic satisfaction that supported conscientious recycling behavior long after the last cup of free coffee was consumed. Further, the widespread publicity given to these individuals may have strengthened Town Hall-wide norms that supported lasting change in recycling behavior. Involving the custodians in recognizing star recyclers and prodding non-participants may have had a long-term effect on their behavior as well.

Prepared by:

Jan Aceti
Aceti Associates
Arlington, MA
781-646-4593

jan@acetiassociates.com
www.acetiassociates.com

¹ Aceti, J. (2002). Recycling: Why People Participate; Why They Don't. [Report prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.

² Rendon Group (2001, January). Focus Group Findings [Report prepared for the Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.

Research International (2000, June). Massachusetts DEP Recycling Participation Study [Report prepared for the Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.

³ Aceti, J. (2002). Recycling: Why People Participate; Why They Don't. [Report prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.

⁴ Aceti, J. (2002). Recycling: Why People Participate; Why They Don't. [Report prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.

⁵ Aceti, J. (2002). Recycling: Why People Participate; Why They Don't. [Report prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection]. Boston, MA.