

The Commitment Strategy

Increasing Recycling Participation Using Community-Based Social Marketing

Introduction

What strategies work to increase participation in community recycling programs? Many recycling program managers develop outreach initiatives based on information gained by word-of-mouth, through trade journals or by attending conferences. These are all important sources of information.

However, unbeknownst to many program managers, social scientists have been studying recycling behavior since the 1970's. In order to identify the barriers and motivations that are related to people's recycling habits, social scientists ask recyclers and non-recyclers questions about a wide variety of factors that might influence their recycling behavior. They then use statistical methods to determine which of these factors are linked to recycling participation and which are not.

Researchers have also evaluated the effectiveness of a variety of strategies to overcome barriers and strengthen motivations. This body of research can provide clear guidance to recycling managers who wish to improve participation in recycling programs.

This document first describes a particular barrier to be overcome and then a strategy that has been shown to be effective in doing that.

The Barrier: Lack of Knowledge

People's knowledge of how and/or what to recycle is linked to their level of recycling participation. As expected, those who are less knowledgeable recycle less or not at all.

A study carried out in Somerset County, New Jersey found that those who were confident about their knowledge of how and what to recycle were significantly more likely

to recycle than were those with less confidence, even among those who had a strong conservation ethic.¹

A synthesis of research results from 67 studies of recycling behavior in drop-off and curbside programs indicated that knowledge of recycling had the highest correlation with propensity to recycle of all of the variables examined.²

Many communities devote the majority of their outreach budget to distributing information about how and what to recycle. While having access to information is essential, it is also necessary that residents use the information in order to become knowledgeable about recycling. How can recycling managers improve the likelihood that recycling information will be absorbed and acted upon?

The Strategy: Combine Information with Personal Contact and a Commitment Request

Research on persuasion indicates that our contact with other people is a major influence upon our attitudes and behavior.³ Furthermore, a substantial body of research indicates that when people make a commitment to do something, they are more likely to act than those who have not made a commitment. This stems from a desire that we all have to see ourselves as consistent – that is, as individuals whose deeds match our words.⁴ The Commitment Strategy involves recruiting community outreach volunteers to provide recycling information to their neighbors and to ask them to make a written commitment to recycle.

Strategy #4

Description

The Commitment Strategy was used to increase the amount of newspaper recycled in a suburban neighborhood in Portland, Oregon.⁵ A group of residents was contacted in person by the researcher, who provided them with recycling information and then asked them to sign a commitment statement that read, "In the interest of conservation, I commit my household to participating in this newspaper recycling project for two weeks." The commitment form was a carbon copy so that both the researcher and the resident could keep a copy of the signed statement. They were informed that the form was not legally binding.

Benefits

The group that made a written commitment recycled 253% more than another group that simply had information dropped off at their door. Furthermore, the group that had made a written commitment continued to recycle more than the information-only group even after being informed that their commitment to the project was over.

The Commitment Strategy can also be employed in drop-off communities. In one study, recycling information combined with personal contact and a request for a commitment to recycle increased self-reported drop-off recycling among new residents by 88%, compared to less than 10% for those receiving written information alone.⁶

Procedure

In Portland, the Commitment Strategy was piloted on a small scale, involving about thirty households. By employing community outreach volunteers, the strategy can have a much broader impact. A test of a similar strategy in Claremont, California provides information on recruiting and utilizing outreach volunteers.⁷ The following suggestions draw upon the Claremont

study, but are modified to suit the Commitment Strategy.

1. Recruiting Outreach Volunteers and Identifying Non – Recyclers

Outreach volunteers can be recruited from among residents observed to be participating in a community's curbside recycling program. In order to determine which households were recycling in Claremont's curbside program and which were not, observations of 200 households were made for four weeks in a row. These observations took about an hour per collection day.

Households that recycle at least once during the observation period are then contacted by municipal staff and invited to act as outreach volunteers. The staff person would knock on the door, introduce herself and say something like this: "We've noticed your recyclables at the curb on trash day and we wish that there were more people like you. Our latest strategy to increase recycling is to have people who are already recycling explain to their neighbors how easy and important it is, and to ask their neighbors to sign a pledge to recycle. I've got a list right here of ten of your non-recycling neighbors. Would you be willing to be a recycling outreach volunteer?"

Immediately upon agreement, the outreach volunteer packet is explained. Outreach volunteers are asked to try and approach their neighbors within two weeks. If, after three weeks, a completed checklist has not been received by municipal staff, a brief written reminder is sent.

2. The Outreach Volunteer Packet

An outreach volunteer packet might contain:

- a. A outreach volunteer checklist – a list of the addresses of non-recycling neighbors, with spaces to record the date and time of contact, and whether the contact was made in

Strategy #4

person, by phone, or by leaving the materials at the door with a personal note.

- b. An instruction sheet – instructs the outreach volunteer to give each household contacted a recycling information sheet, and a personal note if no one is at home after several tries. This sheet also instructs outreach volunteers to introduce themselves as a neighbor and explain their appointment by a city committee as “recycling outreach volunteer.” They are then to verbally explain how important recycling is, how easy it is to recycle with the city program and to point out the list specifying the materials recycled by the city. This “speech” is to end with a request to sign a commitment to recycle.
- c. Enough commitment statements for each address on the list.
- d. A self addressed stamped envelope so that the completed checklist can be mailed back to the municipal staff.

3. Making Commitment Requests

A variety of studies have clarified when commitment requests are likely to be most effective.⁸

Ask for public commitments (“The city plans to purchase ad space in the Daily News Tribune in order to recognize everyone who has made this pledge. Do we have permission to publish your name?”)

Help people to see themselves as environmentally concerned.

Don’t use coercion. The commitment will not work if the person feels pressured.

Resources Needed

Staff time would be needed to monitor curbside recycling for non-recyclers and for potential outreach volunteers, to prepare outreach volunteer packets and to recruit outreach volunteers. It took three to four hours to recruit eight outreach volunteers for the Claremont

study. Staff time would also be required to follow up with outreach volunteers. Funds would need to be budgeted for outreach volunteer packets.

As described above, this strategy is staff time intensive. A number of steps could be taken to reduce the staff time needed. The staff time needed could be spread out over several years by implementing the strategy gradually until all community areas had been reached.⁹ Members of solid waste committees or volunteer student or service organizations could be employed to recruit the outreach volunteers. Members of volunteer groups such as the Boy or Girl Scouts could be trained to act as the outreach volunteers themselves.

Additional Research Needed

Recycling behavior was observed for only four weeks after the contacts by the Portland researcher. Therefore, it would be important to evaluate the durability of increased recycling tonnage over a longer time period.

Secondly, it would also be beneficial to examine the costs and benefits of asking the outreach volunteers to contact all of the neighbors on their block, whether they recycle or not. Many recyclers do not recycle as much as they could. Asking outreach volunteers to contact all of their neighbors would eliminate the need to prepare lists of non-recyclers’ addresses. It may also alleviate potential discomfort that outreach volunteers could feel about approaching solely their non-recycling neighbors. It would however, require each outreach volunteer to contact more people or require the recruitment of more outreach volunteers.

Evaluation Method

In order to rule out the possibility that changes in recycling habits are due to factors other than the strategy, observations should be made in a pilot area and in a control area that is not

Strategy #4

exposed to the Commitment Strategy. The two areas should be demographically similar. Because this strategy is time intensive, communities may wish to include only 100-200 homes in each area in order to test and perfect the technique before implementing it on a larger scale.

Baseline observations should be made for five weeks in each area before the strategy is implemented, and follow-up observations for five weeks after contact is made by the outreach volunteer. One week should be allowed between the date of contact by the outreach volunteer and the first follow up observation, so that households have time to accumulate some recyclables.

The difference in the percentage of recyclers in the strategy area before and after the outreach volunteer contact would be compared to any change in the control area during the same time period. If the change in the percentage of recyclers in the strategy area is greater than any change in the control area, it can be concluded that the effect is due to the strategy. If the strategy is effective, it would be beneficial to make observations for several more five week periods over at least a year's time, to determine if changes in recycling behavior persist.

If the outreach volunteers contact both recyclers and non-recyclers in their neighborhood, observations of both the presence and quantity (preferably the weight) of recyclables at each household will need to be made. It is not likely to be realistic for volunteers to conduct observations or measure weights. However, municipal or contractual staff can be used to gather this data. A good quality, portable scale, purchasable for \$100-\$200, can be used for weight measurements.

Drop-off communities can evaluate changes in the percentage of visitors from the outreach volunteer strategy area compared to the control area by asking all drop-off center visitors for

their address during the baseline and follow up measurement periods. If this is considered too invasive, residents could be asked to indicate which part of town they are from.

Questions?

Contact Brooke Nash of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection at 617-292-5984.

End Notes

¹Simmons, D & Widmar, R. (1990). p16.

²Hornick, J. et. al (1995). p117.

³McKenzie-Mohr, D. (1999). p95.

⁴McKenzie-Mohr, D. (1999). p48.

⁵Pardini, A.U & Katzev, R.D. (1983-84). p248-251.

⁶Arbuthnot, J. et. al. (1976-77)

⁷Burn, S.M. (1991). p620-621.

⁸McKenzie-Mohr, D. (1999). p58.

⁹Burn, S.M. (1991). p624.

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