



CHANGE DOESN'T COME EASY

Understanding Behavior to Encourage Conservation Goals

By Kathy Jespersen
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Today, people are bombarded with messages about what's healthy, socially acceptable, or good for the environment—don't smoke; eat five to nine servings of fruit and vegetables a day; conserve water. All of these messages require an individual, or a community, to change a behavior from one that's unhealthy or otherwise unacceptable to one that will improve their quality of lives.

Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want his or her life improved? But let's face it. If it were easy, we'd all be thin people who drive fuel efficient cars to markets where we buy locally grown organic food all while only watering our lawns twice a week after the sun goes down.

So, if it isn't easy, what makes it so hard? The answer lies in recognizing that people aren't willing to abandon deep-seated beliefs and attitudes easily—even if that means holding onto a behavior that may be harmful, negative, or even dangerous. Think about it. When was the last time you changed your behavior just because someone told you to?

Change Isn't Quick or Easy

Change doesn't come easy for most people. And when it does occur, it happens over long periods of time, often years, according to Philip G. Zimbardo and Michael R. Leippe, authors of the *Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence*.

With this in mind, let's take a look at why some water conservation programs don't succeed that way we imagine they should. First, telling people that saving water is the "right thing to do" likely won't get you very far. Doing so assumes that people's attitudes and beliefs about water conservation are aligned with your own.

Jeff Hoffman, president of the Hoffman Agency, a Florida-based

social marketing and public relations firm, agrees. "One water conservation specialist with a mid-level municipal water system wrote an article in a trade publication in which she said that it angered her that her neighbors over-irrigate their lawns when 'they know better' because '[She'd] worked hard to educate the public that what they are doing is wrong and they should stop.'"

I've Got the Answers

"A lot of people assigned the task of public outreach make the prime mistake of being a focus group of one, believing that if I feel a certain way, or have an understanding about how water should be used, then everyone else does, too," says Hoffman. "Deriving a public outreach program from on the insights of a focus group of one is a conceit in which one can be easily trapped."

"Almost all of us have fallen prey to similar conceits at some point," he continues. "However, reliance on a narrowly focused view disregards that other people don't have similar knowledge, experiences, or similar priorities. Outreach programs like this fail to achieve their goals because they don't start from the perspective of the general public and shift attitudes by helping people recognize what personal benefits are gained by forming good conservation habits."

I Have Other Things to Do

As water professionals, we have adopted ideas and behaviors that support our cause. But what we don't always understand is that the way we think often no longer reflects how our customers think, says *Marketing Social Change*, an online guide developed by the

Priority Ventures Group. What we need to understand is that most people believe they have far more pressing matters to attend to.

In 2000, the Arizona Department of Water Resources partnered with the cities of Phoenix, Mesa, and Scottsdale to develop the Water—Use it Wisely campaign. To find out more about how the citizens rated water conservation in their daily lives, they surveyed citizens in the area.

They found that water conservation was ranked in importance below other local concerns such as air quality and traffic congestion. The research further revealed that people lacked knowledge about how to save water, and most people thought that their individual actions would not make a difference.

A recent study conducted by the Water Research Foundation had similar findings. While respondents said that saving money and doing right thing for the environment were motivators for participating in a water conservation program, most



people thought they were already doing everything they could conserve water. These inconsistent ideas are found throughout the water industry. “On the one hand I want to help, but what can I do if I’m already doing everything I can?”

The temptation is think that more education will help. Education increases knowledge; and when people learn that particular behaviors are bad, it just stands to reason that they will change their behavior. Right? Not so fast. Some people will probably change, but most will not. Why?

“You have to have a process by which good ideas become effective ideas,” notes John Hadidian, director of the Urban Wildlife Program for the Humane Society. That process is going to have to explore the values, attitudes, and beliefs of your audience.

Breaking Tradition

The key to making water conservation programs work is to break out of traditional educational programs. And that means exploring what the audience or, in the case of the water industry, customers really want. Here’s a revelation: If you want people to change, you had better give them a good reason to change, says Getting Your Feet Wet with Social Marketing, a U.S. Department of Agriculture guide to social marketing.

Change is difficult, even when there is great motivation to change. We get used to doing certain things in a certain way. People need to understand that their current

behavior is a problem. But merely understanding that a current behavior is a problem will not necessarily lead to behavior change. You’re going to have to find out what people want; in other words, what’s in it for them?

One of the cold, hard facts that we in the water industry must realize is that if we want other people to change, we may have to make some changes ourselves. This is where social marketing comes in, says the *Basics of Social Marketing*, a guide from the Social Marketing National Excellence Collaborative. Social marketing campaigns seek to bring about behavior change. And they do so in ways that address the audience’s need relative to the needs of the community. They create awareness long before they create the motivation to change. And they rely on the principles of commercial marketing to make their point.

Do you know what I need?

If you don’t address your customers’ wants and needs, you may end up wasting a lot of time and money. In *Marketing Social Change*, there is a story about a national organization that didn’t pay attention to its customers, and even its own research, and ended up paying a heavy price.

“The association developed a software product for members to collect and analyze data, with goals to improve service quality and to help members reduce government regulation,” the guide reports. “However, the association did not

conduct sufficient research on how the product should be designed, who would use it or how it should be promoted. Management did conduct a survey, but largely ignored data on how much members were willing to pay for the software. Hard work, the best of intentions and a useful product were not enough. The software was not widely adopted; the effort lost over a million dollars; and the venture was ultimately discontinued.”

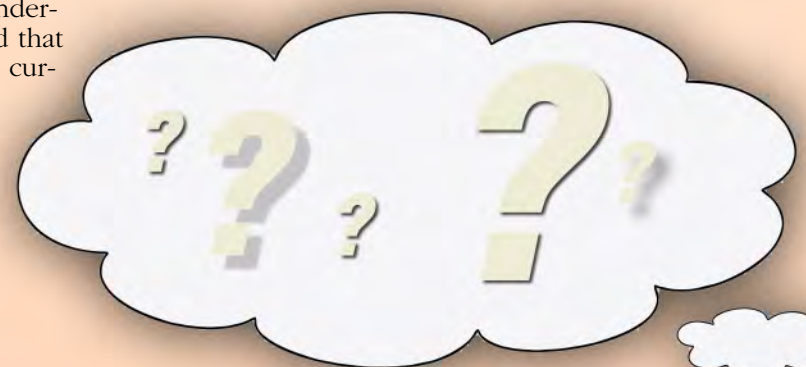
In social marketing, you must know your audience well enough to understand what will motivate them to make changes in their lives. What benefits can you offer to help them over the hump? How can you make it easier for them? It also requires that you not look at your audience as a whole, but as subsets or segments who all have different priorities and motivations.

Focus on people as customers and understand their needs. What does it mean to treat people like customers? Think about a business where you feel like a valued customer. The quality of the product or service pleases you. Maybe the personnel are attentive and efficient. Perhaps the business offers convenient locations or hours. The prices charged are appropriate for what you receive. Each of these elements reflects a business that understands what’s important to customers and delivers against these needs.

Be clear about what you’re asking them to do. And offer them something in return. Many campaigns fail to provide “an exchange.” Customers want a payoff for the proposed action you’re seeking. (See sidebar on page 13.)

What else could go wrong?

“Another failing that I’ve observed [in public education programs] is mistaking activity for productivity,” says



Social Marketing Made Easy

You don’t have to be a marketing expert to practice social marketing.

It does, however, help to understand a few basic marketing principles:

- Really know your *audience* and put them at the center of every decision you make. Social marketing begins and ends with your target audience. To understand why your audience isn’t doing what you want them to do, you must understand what barriers are getting in their way. Understand also that you are not the target audience!
- It’s about *action*. The process of heightening awareness, shifting attitudes, and strengthening knowledge is valuable if, and only if, it leads to action. Be clear in what you want your audience to do.
- There must be an *exchange*. If you want someone to give up, or modify, an old behavior or accept a new one, you must offer that person something very appealing in return. In commercial marketing, there are tangible exchanges (give me a \$1 and I’ll give you a Pepsi) and intangible exchanges (by drinking Pepsi, you’re also receiving everything that goes with the image of the brand). In social marketing, you must know your audience well enough to understand what will motivate them to make changes in their lives. What benefits can you offer to help them over the hump? How can you make it easier for them?
- *Competition* always exists. Your audience can always choose to do something else.

Keep “the four P’s of Marketing,” and policy, in mind:

1. **Product** represents the desired behavior you are asking your audience to do, and the associated benefits, tangible objects, and/or services that support behavior change.
2. **Price** is the cost (financial, emotional, psychological, or time-related) or barriers the audience faces in making the desired behavior change.
3. **Place** is where the audience will perform the desired behavior, where they will access the program products and services, or where they are thinking about your issue.
4. **Promotion** stands for communication messages, materials, channels, and activities that will effectively reach your audience.

Source: Social Marketing National Excellence Collaborative.

Hoffman. “Public outreach programs are often conducted by people pressured by management (or public policy makers) to ‘get the word out’ so we can start conserving water. Flyers, bill stuffers, cute Facebook pages, blogs filled with droning information, and advertisements may all get done, but the only cohesion they may have is that they tell the public to stop using so much water and promote water audits or appliance rebates.”

Hoffman says that when he asked whether appliance rebates and toilet retrofit programs altered water use behavior, one conservation manager with a major municipal system told him that while the answer was probably yes, he believed the program did little to change daily behaviors. The manager told him that the system got more participation by telling people they could get big cost breaks on new appliances—not that they would save water.

“One could argue that his goal (saving water through retrofits) was met,” says Hoffman. “But the long-term goal

of creating new behaviors and contributing to a new social norm related to water wasn’t.”

Did you get my message?

Social marketing is more than messages, however. Not only are these messages coming from almost every media source imaginable, they are competing with each other.

“I once saw a public service ad that read ‘wasting water is a crime,’” says Hoffman. “I didn’t know that. But I wasn’t concerned. The message itself represented an empty threat to which no one would pay serious attention. While for those in the know—or those who gave it a second thought—the gist of the message was understandable: Don’t use more water than you should. For most, I’d venture a guess that they did not heed the message.

“Words can have different meanings for different people,” Hoffman continues. “Words like ‘efficient’ or ‘efficiently’ really chafe me. ‘Be efficient in your water use.’ ‘Only use what you need.’ Really, now. How many people do you

know who say ‘Gosh darn, they’re right—I use too much water.’ Messages like these automatically close the communication. ‘I only use the water I need—that message is for someone else.’ is the most common reaction.”

So what do I do?

Creating a good water conservation program using social marketing strategies requires not only knowing what to do, but what not to do. Developing messages based on what you think people want is a big mistake. To really know, you have to ask them.

While this article only touches on many of the items you must consider, it does provide a good starting point. Remember, your audience—your customers—want to be involved in the process.

“We must not constrain human power, but rather we unleash it,” say Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, political strategists and opinion researchers, and authors of *Break Through, Why We Can’t Leave Saving the Planet to the Environmentalists*. And that means listening to what people really want rather than imposing your will upon them.



More Information

To learn more information about using social marketing, the following resources are available in pdf format:

- Priority Ventures Group, May 2004. “Marketing Social Change,” *Executive Update*. www.priorityventures.com/Marketing%20social%20change.pdf
- Jack Wilbur, 2006. *Getting Your Feet Wet with Social Marketing: A Social Marketing Guide for Watershed Programs*, Utah Department of Food and Agriculture <http://ag.utah.gov/divisions/conservation/documents/GettingYourFeetWet.pdf>
- The Social Marketing National Excellence Collaborative and Turning Point. *The Basics of Social Marketing: How to Use Marketing to Change Behavior*, www.turningpointprogram.org/Pages/pdfs/social_market/smc_

